New

BOOK OF Death

Myths, misconceptions & the remarkable evolution of death beliefs

• Religion & the afterlife • The science of death • Rites & rituals through history •

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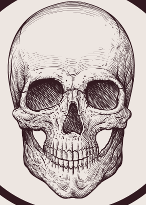
BOOK OF Death

The eternal sleep, passing away, departing this mortal world, popping your clogs - however you phrase it, death is something that will happen to us all. Despite its inevitability, however, the prospect of dying is a petrifying one. It's the great unknown. What is death, and what actually happens when we die? While we can't answer these questions, it can be reassuring to learn about how death is perceived not only in other cultures, but how beliefs and rituals have evolved over the centuries. Over the following pages, trace the remarkable history of death, from the Ancient Egyptians to the American Civil War, and find out how science can help us to understand and demystify our fate.



FUTURE

BOOK OF Death

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Contents

08 Why Are We Scared To Die?
Morbid curiosity about what lies beyond has fascinated and obsessed artists and writers for centuries

The Science of Death

18 Myths And Misconceptions
In most Western societies, death is a taboo subject, which leads to misunderstandings surrounding what happens, and what's acceptable

22 What Does It Feel Like To Die?
The experiences of the dying, and those who have nearly died, give the living a glimpse of what might be to come

26 Donating Your Body To Science
What happens to your remains after you die depends on how you choose to donate

Death Through History

34 The Ancient Egyptian Underworld
We explore the death rites and rituals of the pharaohs and how they evolved over the centuries to reveal changing ideas of life, death and the afterlife

44 The Ancient Greek Underworld
The ghosts of the dead are imprisoned for eternity in a dark, sunless realm full of monstrous supernatural beings, where nothing will ever change

50 Celts: Cult Of Death
From human sacrifice to headhunting, the Celts had a ferocious reputation in the ancient world and a vivid vision of the afterlife

58 Viking Dead: Myths and Practices
From valkyries to Valhalla, how the Vikings saw the world to come

66 Changing Attitudes To Death
How attitudes to death evolved over The Enlightenment

Emetic
Blue Pills
BOARD of HEALTH
Fee Fo Fum
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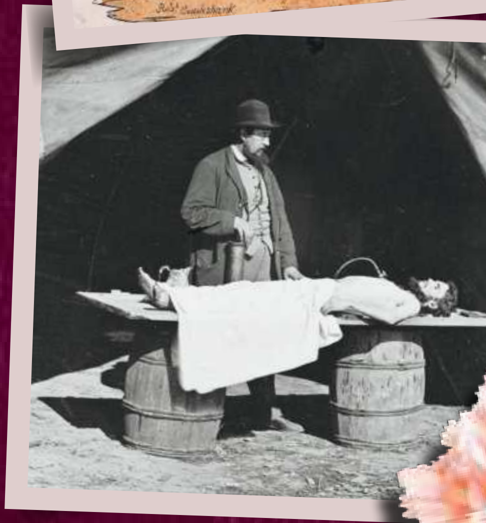


74 The Victorian Cult Of Death
From superstitions to strange rituals, lift the veil on the fascinating and macabre ways the Victorians dealt with mortality

82 Memento Mori
Inside the disturbing world of Victorian post-mortem photography

86 Better Dying Through Chemistry
Preserving the dead was developed during the American Civil War and had a lasting impact on military and civilian funerals through the modern era

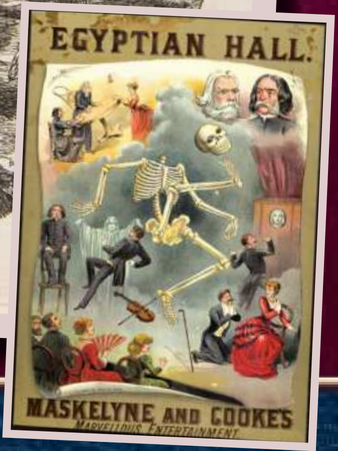
Death In Culture

94 Western Death Practices And Attitudes
Whether it's burying or cremating the dead, fearing death or considering it the start of a sacred journey, humans have been creative around this fact of life

102 In The Court Of King Death
Death is life's non-negotiable – religion is the human half of the contract

112 Staring Death In The Face
In some cultures, physical death is not something to be secreted away – it's a cause for celebration

120 Ghost Festivals
All over the world, ghost festivals are a common and often ancient practice. They are held to venerate, celebrate and remember the dead



Why Are We Scared to Die?

Morbid curiosity about what lies beyond has fascinated and obsessed artists and writers for centuries

Written by Derek Wilson

Shakespeare famously provided the answer to this question in his play about a young man in the grip of mental anguish. He envisaged Hamlet, standing on the wall of Elsinore (modern Kronborg) Castle perched high above the sea, where Baltic waves smashed against the rocks far below. Nothing would be easier than to just lean forward and carry all his troubles with him into the abyss. And yet…

> ***Who would fardels [onerous burdens] bear,***
> ***To grunt and sweat under a weary life,***
> ***But that the dread of something after death,***
> ***The undiscovered country, from whose bourn***
> ***No traveller returns, puzzles the will,***
> ***And makes us rather bear those ills we have***
> ***Than fly to others that we know not of?***
> ***Thus conscience does make cowards of us all…***

Fear of death is, fundamentally, fear of the great unknown.

Perhaps, as Hamlet mused, there is another reality, beyond the material world, one not bounded by space and time.

> ***In that sleep of death what dreams may come***
> ***When we have shuffled off this mortal coil***

However, not everyone faced the ultimate transition with dread. The poet John Donne, a contemporary of Shakespeare, refused to be overawed. As a man of religious conviction, he believed that death was the gateway to eternal life:

> ***Death, be not proud, though some have called thee***
> ***Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so;***
> ***For those whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,***
> ***Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.***
> ***From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,***
> ***Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,***
> ***And soonest our best men with thee do go,***
> ***Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.***
> ***Thou'art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,***
> ***And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,***
> ***And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well***
> ***And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?***
> ***One short sleep past, we wake eternally***
> ***And death shall be no more;***
> ***Death, thou shalt die.***

A contrary opinion was expressed by another literary figure whose life overlapped with that of Shakespeare and Donne. Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, (claimed by some to be the real author of Shakespeare's works) was an amateur poet notorious for his Bohemian lifestyle and his atheism. He also refused to be afraid of death - but for a very different reason. He declared:

> ***After this life, we should be as though we had never been and the rest [i.e. arguments put forward by churchmen] was devised but to make us afraid, like babes and children, of our shadows.***

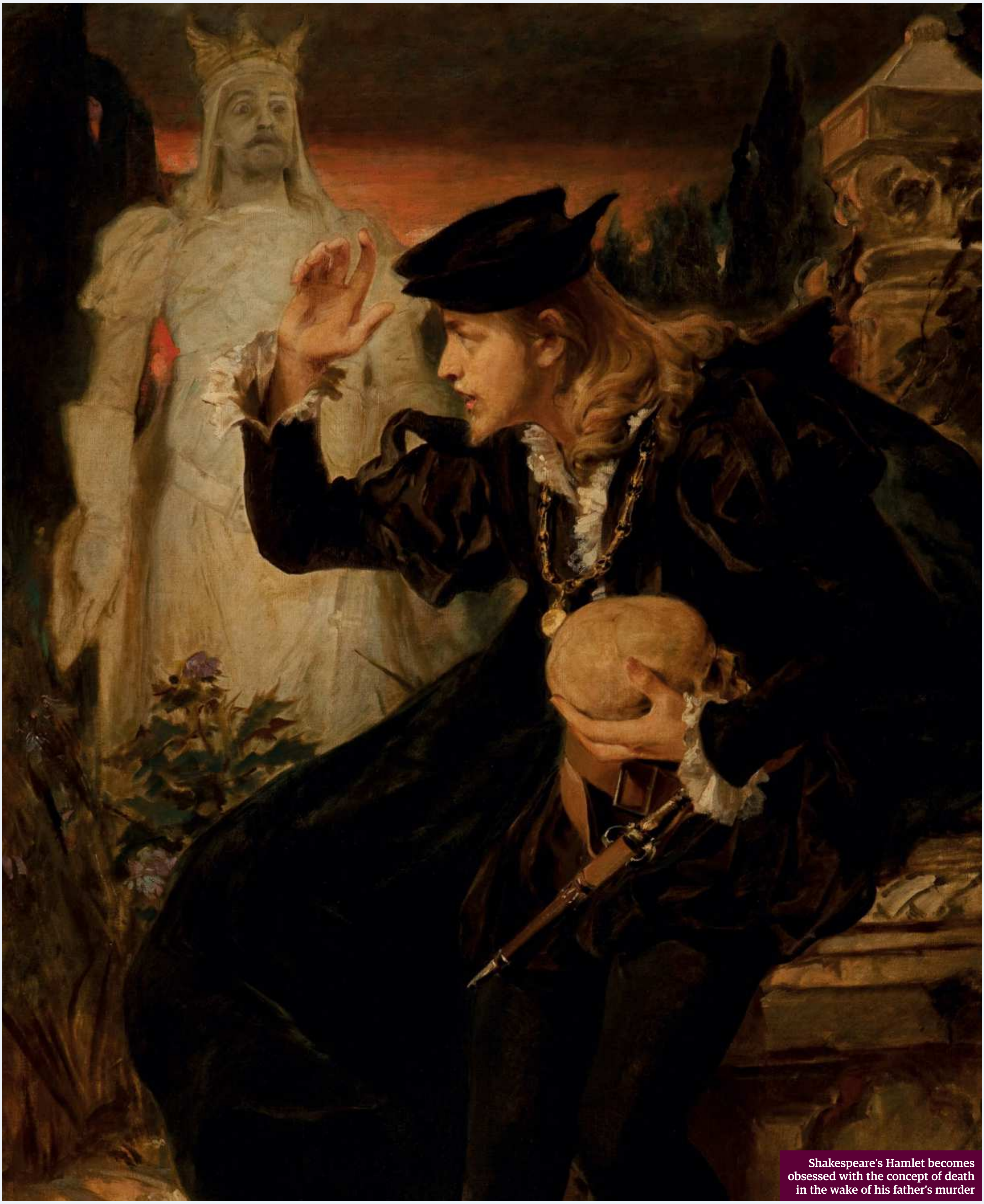
This range of attitudes embraces that variety of human responses to what the Bible calls 'the last enemy' (1 Corinthians 15:26). As far back as records exist, humans have conjured up images of what lies beyond the grave. Other worlds have been conceived - Elysium, Valhalla, Duat, Hades etc - to fill the void of our unknowing. If we are tempted to regard elaborate spiritual realms such as feasting halls in the sky and caves populated by grotesque spirits as the mere fancies of primitive people who lacked intellectual sophistication, we need only reflect on the plethora of video games and fantasy dramas on the large and small screen to realise that visions of 'magical' realms still fascinate millions of people in the 21st century.

The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270BCE) thought that if the gods did exist, they mostly ignored lowly humans. As for the afterlife, he had this to say in his *Letter to Menoeceus*:

> ***Death is nothing to us. When we exist, death is not; and when death exists, we are not. All sensation and consciousness ends with death and therefore in death there is neither pleasure nor pain. The fear of death arises from the belief that in death, there is awareness.***

Whatever stance we take, death remains to us a locked door. We cannot 'know' (in the sense of being able to prove) what lies on the other side, but we are free to espouse a belief about it. This applies as well to atheists as to religious persons, for, although sceptics may claim a 'reasonable doubt' about the existence of an afterlife, they cannot propose a 'clinch' argument that settles the matter once and for all. Teachers, priests, preachers, prophets, gurus and religious guides of all kinds have, of necessity, approached the death door from this side and offered 'explanations' in the hope of inspiring faith in one or other organised religion or philosophy.

People in earlier ages lived closer to death than most of us in the western world today. Consider, for example, the European Middle Ages. Crowded, unsanitary homes and poor personal hygiene provided excellent breeding conditions for rats and the plague-bearing fleas that fed off them. Epidemics of bubonic or pneumonic plague made frequent appearances. The worst outbreak



Shakespeare's Hamlet becomes obsessed with the concept of death in the wake of his father's murder was the Black Death, which was at its height between 1347 and 1351. Precise statistics cannot be established but it is confidently asserted that this pestilence wiped out around half of the population of Europe. Even in non-plague years, typhoid and typhus fevers were frequent visitors. The scourge of the 16th century was the sweating sickness. Henry VIII was so wary of it that he maintained about 30 palaces within easy reach of London, to which he could flee at the first sign of disease in his court. Add to this the loss of life from puerperal fever (and other birth-related maladies) and famine, and it is no surprise that life expectancy by Shakespeare's time was less than 40 years old. Nor is it a surprise that more than 12% of infants died in their first year. Intermittent warfare, of course, added to the toll. As well as battle fatalities, combatants and civilians suffered from devastated crops and looted livestock, which led to mass starvation.

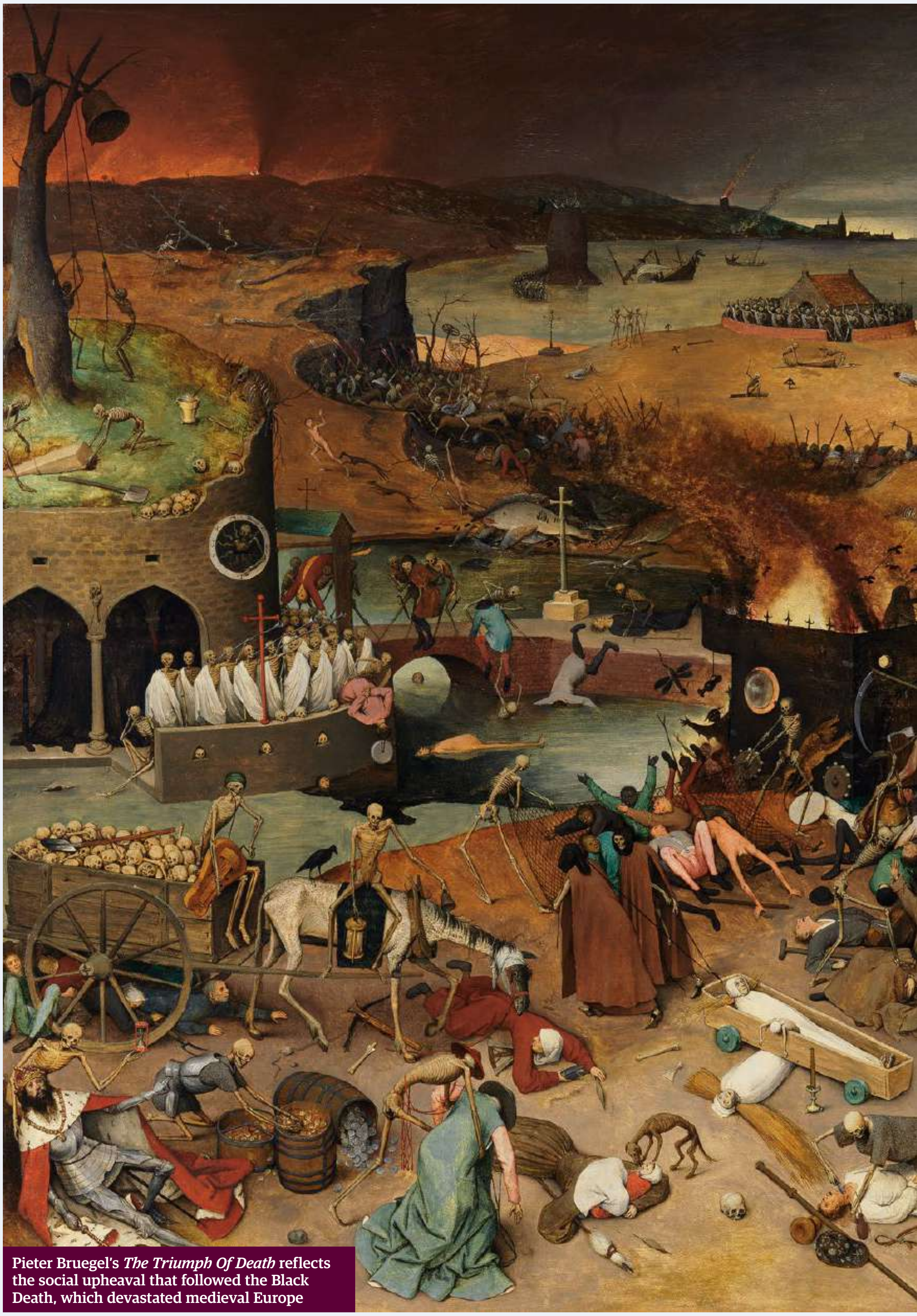
People did not have to have close encounters with death in their own households to be aware of its constant presence. This was an age in which capital punishment was imposed for numerous crimes. Executions were carried out in public and frequently attracted crowds. Even after the sentence had been carried out, authorities extracted further publicity value from the criminals by displaying their heads on spikes or hanging their decomposing bodies on gibbets. In the case of religious offenders (heretics), the punishment was even more spectacular - they were burned to death at the stake. Not only was there no escaping frequent contact with mortality, but the authorities in church and state used such contact as a way of encouraging conformity.

> "The authorities used the threat of mortality as a way of encouraging conformity"

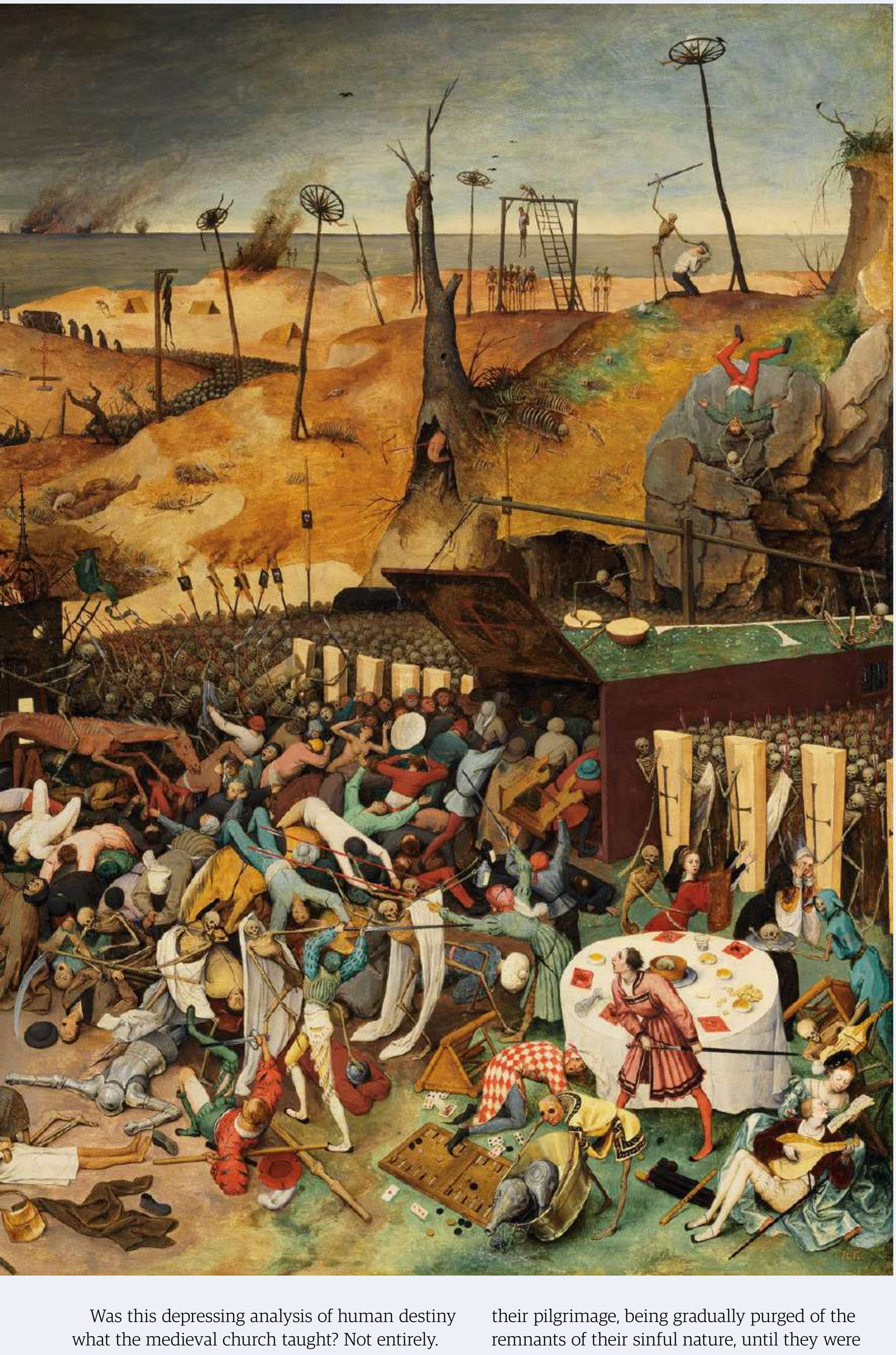
It is not difficult to understand that civic authorities traded on the fear of death to motivate good citizenship and deter folk from lawlessness, but what was the official stance of the church? The 15th-century German-Dutch devotional writer Thomas à Kempis provided a concise answer in his best-seller, *The Imitation Of Christ*:

It is good, however, that even if love does not as yet restrain you from evil, at least the fear of hell does

In pictorial terms, that message was driven home in the remarkable paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, a successful and popular Netherlandish artist, and a member of the devotional Confraternity of Our Lady. It comes as something of a surprise to learn that Bosch was a member of the municipal elite, for his works express a highly individualistic, not to say bizarre and grotesque quality. Frightening demonic forms, part human and part animal, crowd his paintings, driving home moral lessons in a way that goes well beyond the eccentric. His large altarpiece, *The Haywain Triptych*, depicts humanity as a crowd of wanton, self-indulgent individuals indulging numerous vices and oblivious to the all-seeing Christ, who beholds them from heaven. The wagon they are gleefully dragging is en route to its inevitable destination - a lurid, smouldering Hell.



Pieter Bruegel's *The Triumph Of Death* reflects the social upheaval that followed the Black Death, which devastated medieval Europe



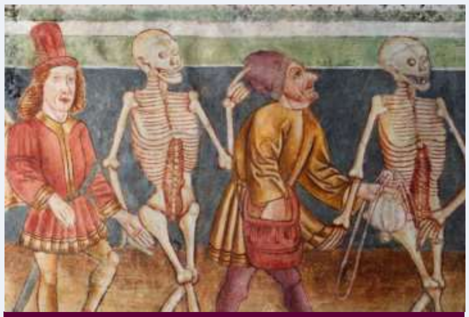
Was this depressing analysis of human destiny what the medieval church taught? Not entirely. The doctrine of purgatory, formalised in the 13th century by the Dominican friar, philosopher and Catholic priest Thomas Aquinas, represented the soul as continuing its journey heavenwards after death. Saints and Christian martyrs reached the presence of God rapidly. Everyone else continued their pilgrimage, being gradually purged of the remnants of their sinful nature, until they were fit to face the judgement seat of God. They were assisted on their journey by the prayers of the saints in heaven and the devout on earth.

This belief in an interim state of being between earth and heaven spawned several religious practices. The most obvious to us today is the

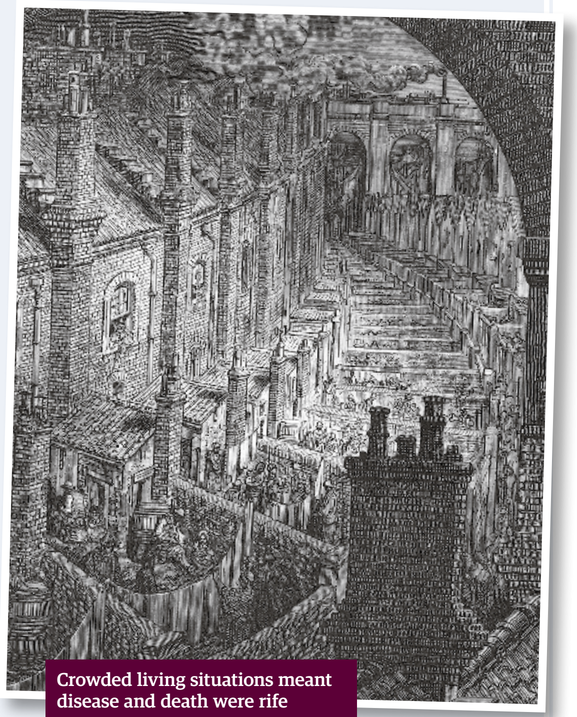
The Dance of Death

How medieval art kept people in touch with their mortality

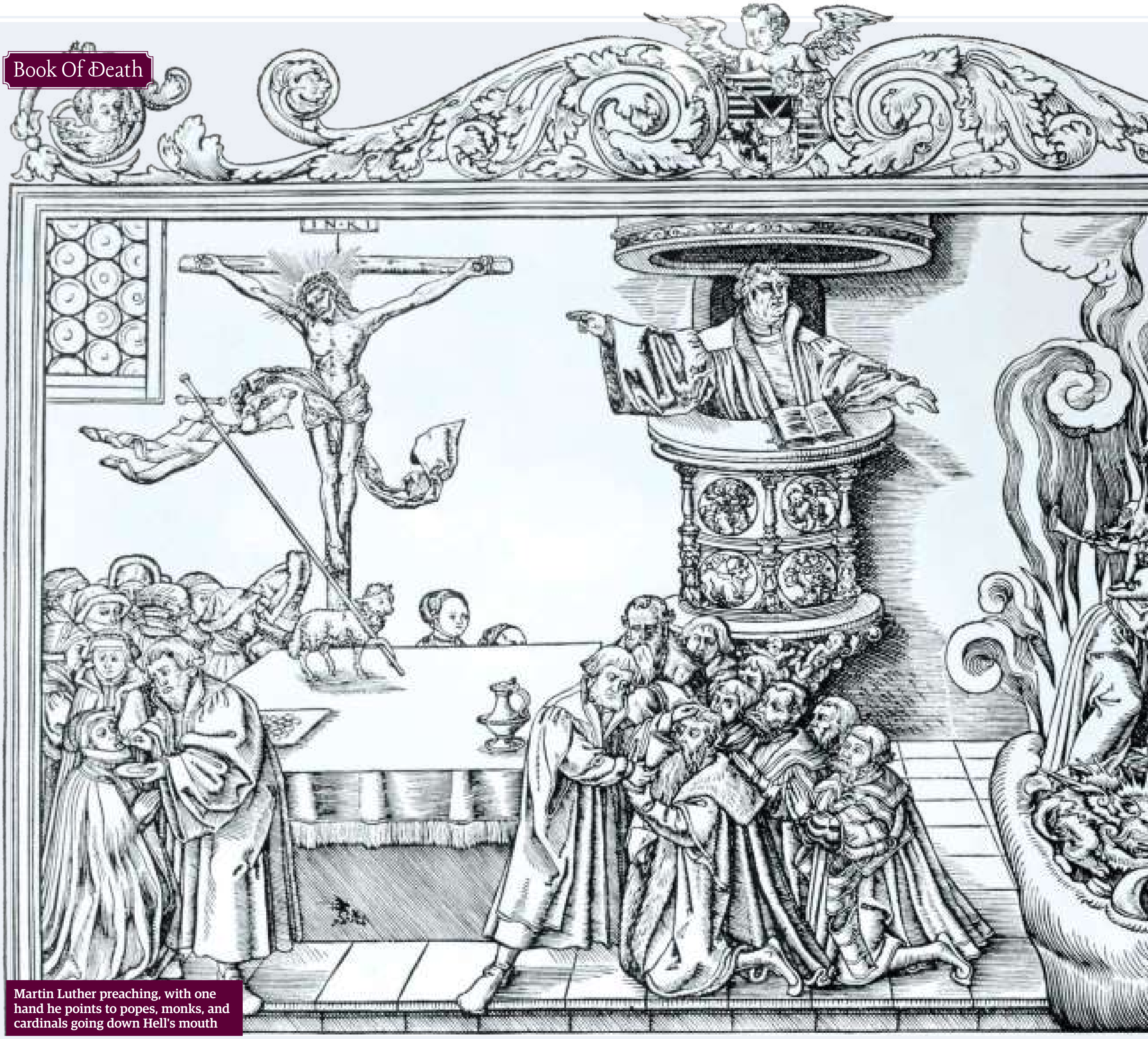
A familiar image throughout much of continental Europe in the Middle Ages was the Dance of Death, which often adorned the walls of popular public spaces where people congregated to socialise. Such gruesome murals reminded passers-by of the inevitability and the universality of death. This 15th-century example from Slovenia shows prominent citizens reluctant to join the dance (one seems to be trying to bribe his dancing master), but being caught up in the stately measure. The most famous version of the 'danse macabre' was on the walls of Holy Innocents' Cemetery in Paris. Adjacent to the burial ground was a charnel house, packed to the rafters with skulls and bones cleared from earlier graves to make room for the latest arrivals.



One unwilling dance participant appears to be attempting to bribe his partner



Crowded living situations meant disease and death were rife



Martin Luther preaching, with one hand he points to popes, monks, and cardinals going down Hell's mouth

> "Monetary contributions could buy an easy passage through purgatory for the donor"

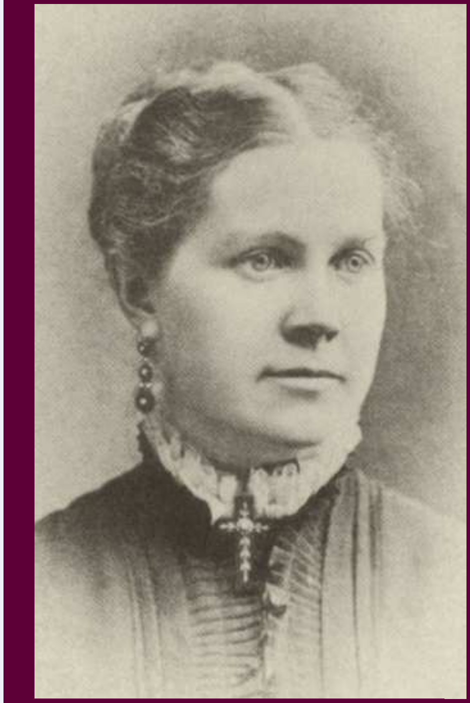
elaborate tombs and memorials that adorn thousands of European churches. Their primary purpose was to encourage ongoing prayer for the departed. Just as the devout travelled to shrines to ask long-departed saints to intercede for them, pilgrims added their pleas on behalf of dead ancestors and relatives. 'Location, location, location' had a particular significance. One scheme hit upon by some wealthy medievals was to have their bodies cut into pieces and buried separately, thus encouraging more intercessors, and spreading the investment of their remains to promote maximum spiritual returns. A more widespread custom on the part of rich donors was the provision of money to priests, monks or nuns for the saying of requiem masses. In his will, Henry VII allocated funds to be divided between various religious communities who were to pray for his soul. He left instructions for 10,000 masses to be said at Westminster Abbey, and prayers to be offered there for "as long as the world shall endure". His son, Henry VIII, went much further, pledging more than twice as much per annum for masses to be said "as long as the world shall endure".

It was this intercessory 'internet' that gave rise to the scandal that sparked the Reformation. 'Indulgences' were vouchers issued by the Pope remitting periods of time spent in purgatory in return for acts of devotion (such as going on crusade) or making monetary contributions in support of religious initiatives. With the passing of time, the cash element took over. The purchase of indulgences became a means of buying an easy passage through purgatory for the donor or his departed loved ones. This racket based upon the fear of death and what lay beyond (though never, in its crudest form, endorsed by theologians) was exposed by German monk Martin Luther in 1517, in his widely circulated *95 Theses*. This document precipitated religious revolution and divided Christendom into Catholic and Protestant camps.

This crisis might have remained a storm in an ecclesiastical teacup had it not coincided with other momentous events. European voyages of discovery were revealing a world larger and stranger than anyone had ever known. Beyond its bounds, star gazers were formulating new theories about the shape and workings of the universe. Old truths were being questioned – and not just

Kindertotenlieder

For many people, their greatest fear isn't their own death, but the loss of their family



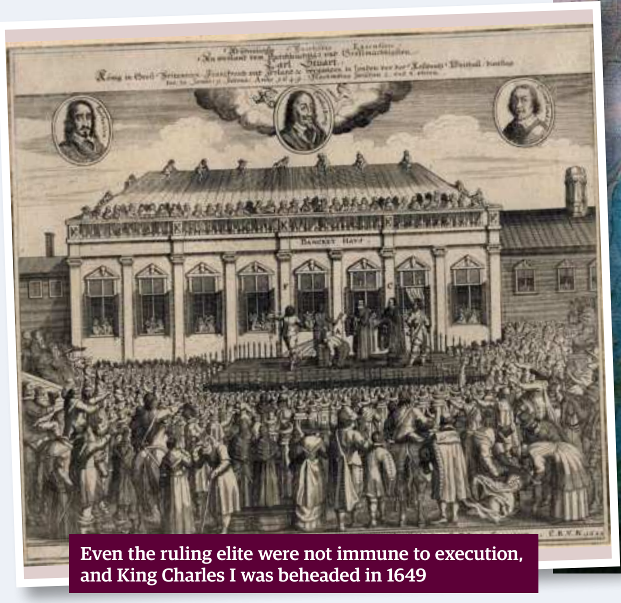
Anna Spafford and her husband Horatio tragically lost their four daughters at sea

The most agonising emotional experience some people are forced to undergo is the death of children. Little ones can be so full of life and yet so vulnerable to disease and accident. Among the most heart-wrenching songs ever written is Gustav Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* ('On the death of children'), the words of which were taken from 19th-century poems by Frederich Rückert. In one of the poems the grieving parents console themselves:

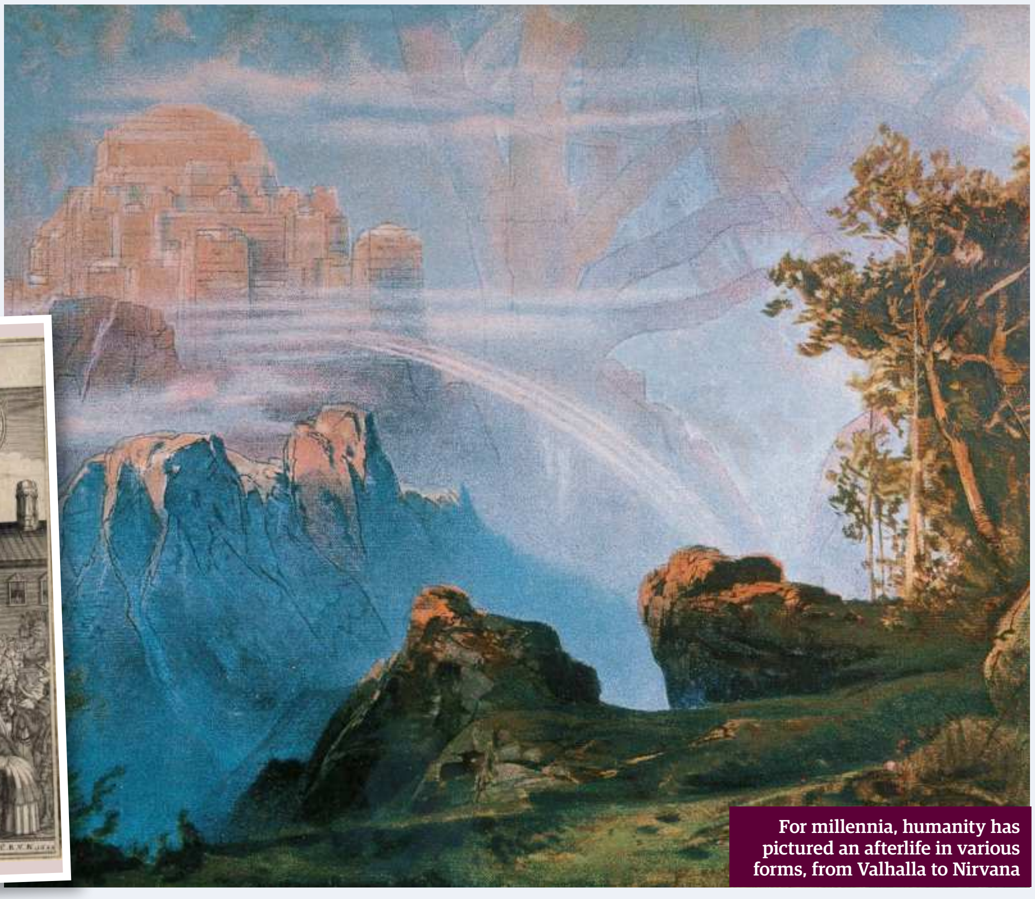
They have merely gone on ahead of us
And will not be coming home again
We shall overtake them on those hills
In the sunshine! The day is beautiful on those hills.

The tragic story of Horatio and Anna Spafford unfolded around the same time. In 1871, Horatio, an American lawyer, suffered heavy financial loss in a devastating fire. Two years later, a doctor recommended a holiday abroad for Anna's health, so the couple booked a trip to England with their four young daughters. Anna went on ahead with the girls while Horatio remained to conclude some business. Tragically, the ship, the Ville du Havre, collided with another vessel and sank, and all four Spafford children were among the 226 victims. The couple went on to have three more children, but their young son died from scarlet fever. It is not possible to imagine the couple's anguish. Yet from it, or rather from the Christian faith that comforted them in their grief, emerged one of the most famous hymns of the age, *It Is Well With My Soul*, which Horatio wrote on his way to join his wife in England.

When peace like a river, attendeth my way
When sorrows like sea billows roll,
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say
'It is well, it is well, with my soul.'



Even the ruling elite were not immune to execution, and King Charles I was beheaded in 1649



For millennia, humanity has pictured an afterlife in various forms, from Valhalla to Nirvana by secluded scholars in their academic eyries. Just as computer technology has revolutionised the spread of ideas in our own day, so printing technology disseminated information and theories that turned traditional assumptions (and the authorities whose security was based on those assumptions) upside down. Books made the latest thinking available to anyone with the means and the curiosity to learn to read. And the book topping most wish lists was the Bible.

Within a few decades, Christianity in Protestant lands changed from an image-based religion to an ideas-based religion. Paintings and statuary that had offered striking, ready-made interpretations of Bible stories and legends of the saints were removed from churches and replaced by the written word of God, recited, read and proclaimed. Ecclesiastical authority was undermined. Every literate Christian with a Bible was free to interpret it at will - a challenging task since the holy canon comprises 73 (for Catholics) or 66 (for Protestants) works of history, biography, poetry, philosophy, letters and prophecy. It's one of the major ironies of western culture that the individualism promoted by vernacular Bibles that has strengthened the faith and the impact of Protestants over the last five centuries has also fortified the unbelief of atheists and sceptics who have rejected all religious authority. Christianity may thus be seen as both a contributory factor to and an enemy of the 18th-century Enlightenment.

> “People who have stared death in the face are, in most cases, loath to talk about it, let alone theorise about it”

The years that saw the philosophical attack on traditional religion by David Hume, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and other analytical thinkers also witnessed British maritime expansion and the establishment of a world-spanning empire that imposed the culture (including the religion) of the imperial power upon a heterogeneous multitude of peoples. In the minds of those planting the Union Jack in other soils (and in the minds of those who cheered them on), Christianity and civilisation became inextricably entwined. Among the effects of that upon popular belief (or hope) was the resurfacing of an ancient patriotic myth that dying for one's country was the finest end anyone could meet.

The Roman poet Horace had put it succinctly: ‘Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori’ - It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country. In Norse mythology, those who were killed in battle were assured of a welcome in Valhalla, the feasting hall of the god, Odin. Islamic suicide bombers, such as those who flew airliners into New York's Twin Towers in 2001, believed they were promised by the Quran a blissful, eternal life in Paradise where willing virgins were available to cater for the 'heroes'' every need. It is not only Muslim extremists who cherish such hopes - the Christian church has always celebrated its martyrs. John Foxe's *Book Of Martyrs*, which eulogised at great length the thousands of men and women who had died for their faith over the centuries was, for 300 years after its publication in Elizabeth I's reign, second only to the King James Bible as a best seller. Christianity has certainly had its share of fanatics, like the 4th-century Circumcellions, who in their zeal to barge their way into heaven, waylaid lone travellers with the demand, “Kill us or we will kill you.”

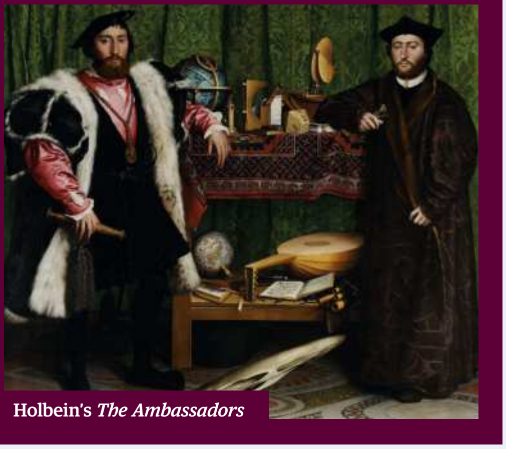
One commonly observed fact is that people who have stared death in the face are, in most cases, loath to talk about it, let alone theorise about it. The soldier poet Wilfred Owen angrily rounded on those who, unlike him, had not seen

Death Symbols

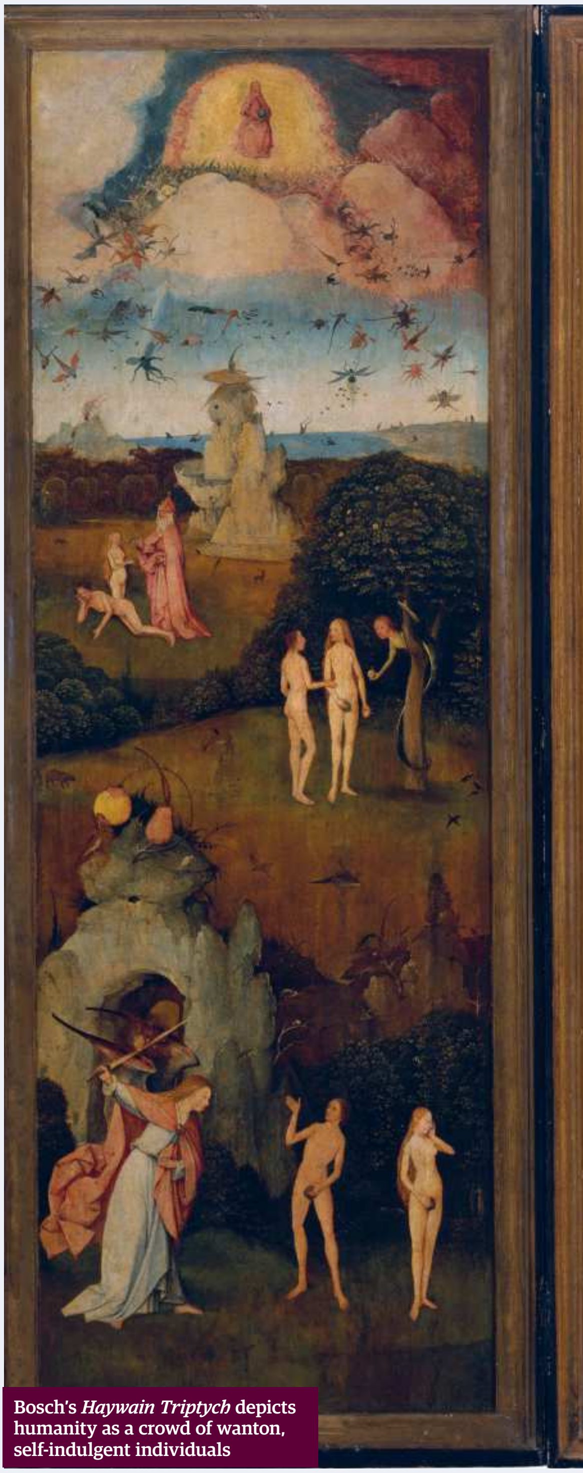
In art, skulls are synonymous with death

During the 16th century Reformation, thousands of works of medieval art were destroyed. This was because the people establishing what they considered to be a purer, more accurate understanding of the Christian faith were intent on removing from church interiors images that represented medieval interpretations of biblical and hagiographical teaching that were dangerously misleading. However, artists still wanted to make important statements – statements that might not be immediately apparent to the viewer and that needed examination and reflection. They invented a rich and ever-growing ‘alphabet’ of religious symbols. Many of them represented death and were designed to remind the viewers of their mortality. The most common symbol was the skull. Others that spoke of bodily decomposition were wilting flowers and rotting fruit. Hourglasses and timepieces pointed to the brevity of human life and its eventual end.

The most remarkable example of a painting jam-packed with hidden meanings is Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors*. At face value it is a dual portrait of two important men standing either side of a large array of objects that indicate their importance and accomplishments. But the iconography embraces other ideas. An open hymn book displays a lyric indicating the need to live a good life. Various mathematical instruments and timepieces point to the fleetingness of life. The lute on a lower shelf is useless because it has a broken string. A crucifix is relegated to the extreme top left-hand corner and obscured by the curtain – a comment on religious conflict obscuring truth. And, most dramatic of all, the foreground is dominated by a distorted skull.



Holbein's *The Ambassadors*



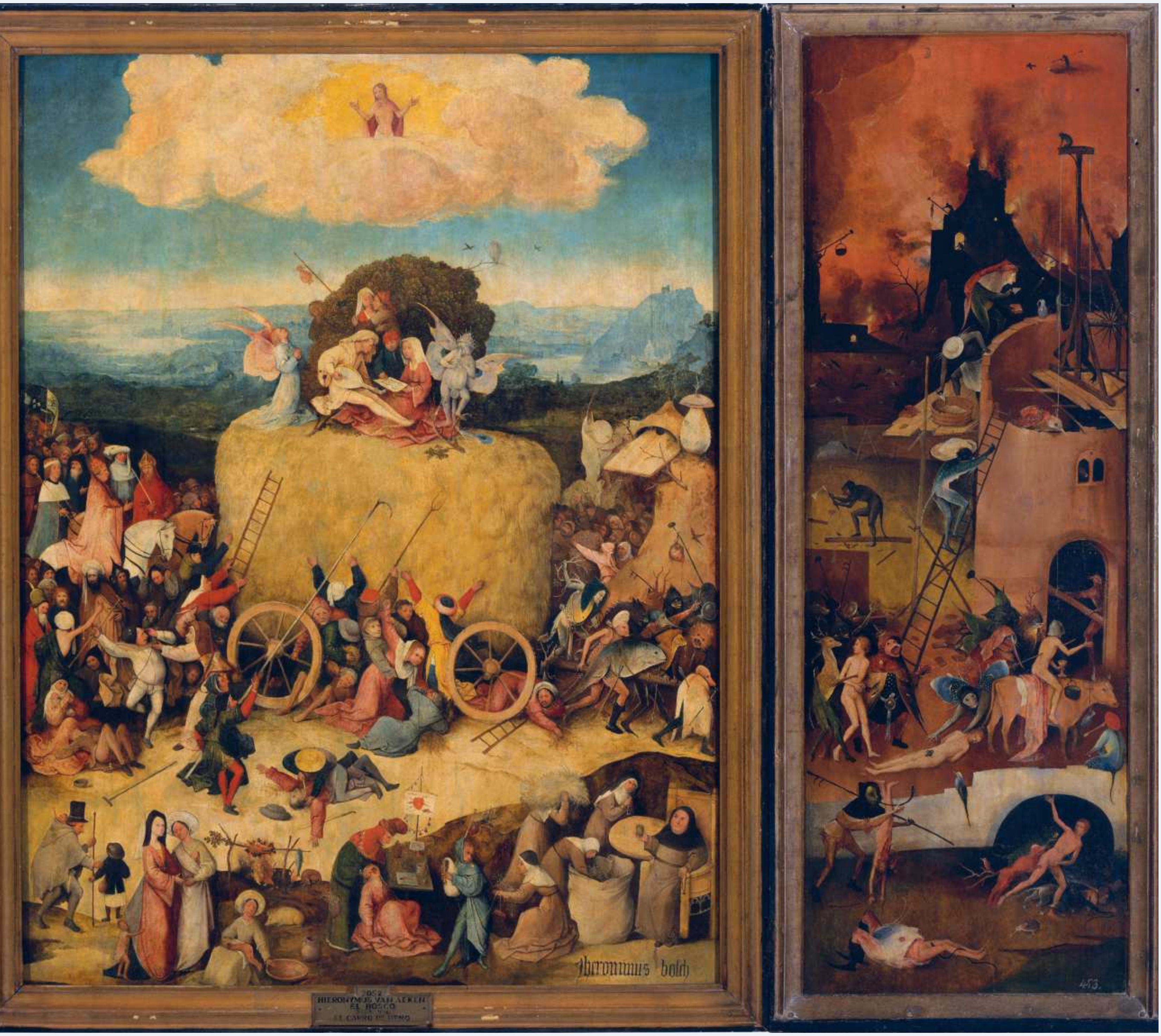
Bosch's *Haywain Triptych* depicts humanity as a crowd of wanton, self-indulgent individuals

at first hand the muddy hell of trench warfare in World War I. This was how he described the death of a comrade caught in a poison gas attack in his 1917 poem *Dolce et Decorum Est*:

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin,
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues –
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Like *Hamlet* it behoves us, in all humility, to draw back from speculation about the 'undiscovered country', to accept gratefully whatever consolation and hope our religion may grant us and concentrate our efforts on living now in such a way that we need have no fear about whatever may face us when we embark on our all-important last journey.

Wilfred Owen deplored those who celebrated patriotic deaths



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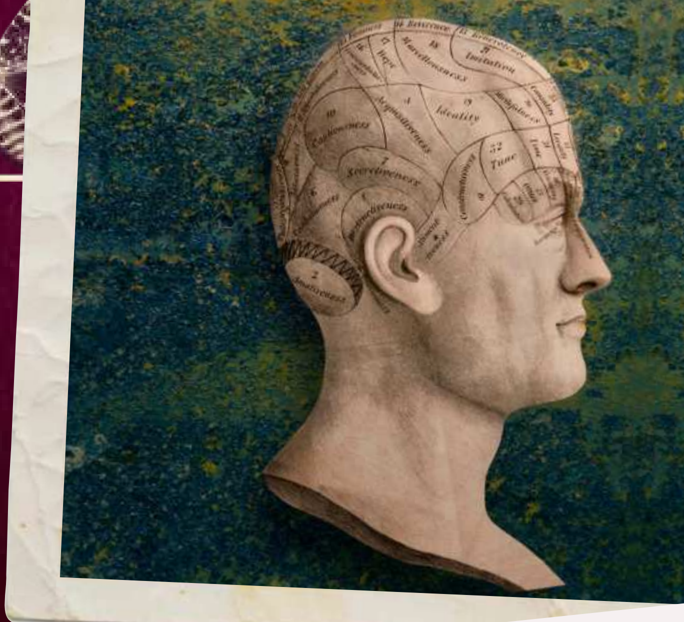

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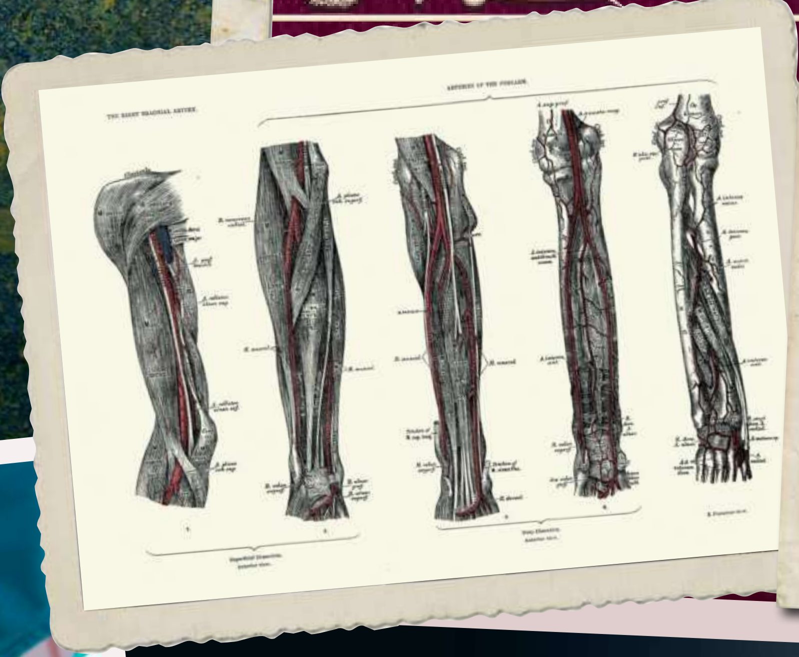
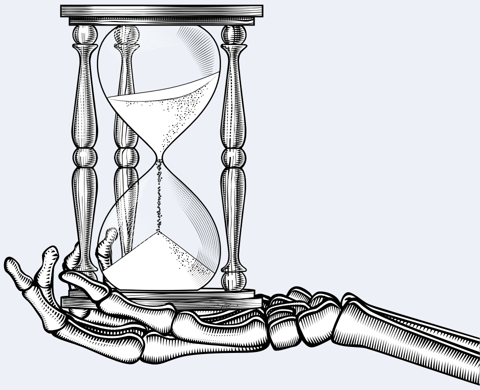
26 Donating Your Body To Science
What happens to your remains after you die depends on how you choose to donate

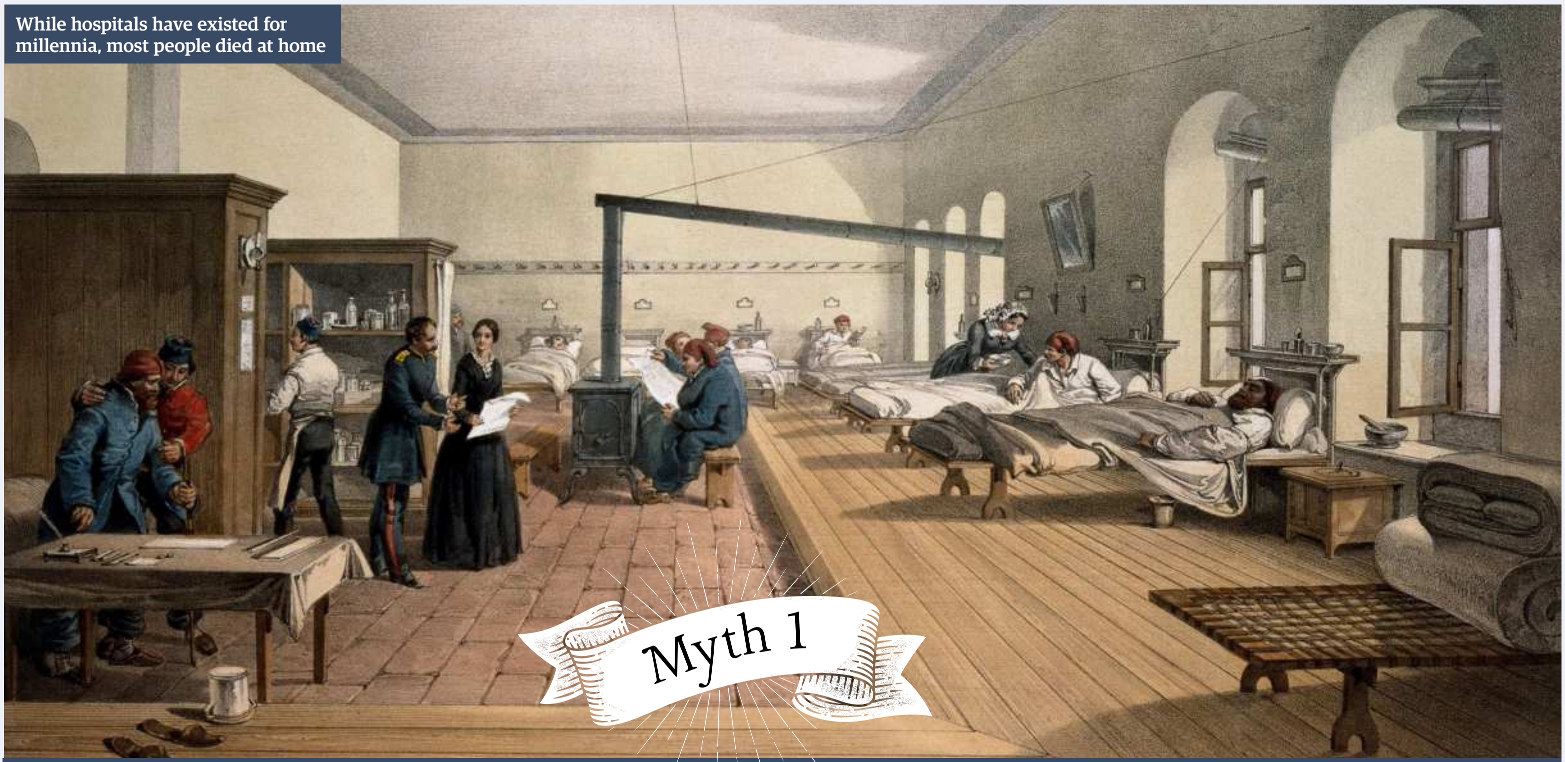




Myths and Misconceptions

In most Western societies, death is a taboo subject, which leads to misunderstandings surrounding what happens, and what's acceptable

Written by Joanna Elphick



While hospitals have existed for millennia, most people died at home

Myth 1

It's Unhygienic To Have A Body At Home

Since the birth of the death business in the wake of World War I, many people assume it's unhygienic - or worse, illegal - to keep a body at home

ANSWER: Before the devastation of World War I, death was an incredibly personal experience for a family. In their final hours, loved ones were kept in the home surrounded and cared for by the family until they passed away. Even in death, the body remained in familiar surroundings, and was cleaned and mourned at home. It's only since the massive death tolls inflicted by war that attitudes towards death and caring for the dead changed, and hospitals and funeral homes became increasingly popular to care for the dying and dead respectively. With the passing of time, our collective memory of personally experiencing death has disappeared, and in its stead is the belief that it's unclean - or even illegal - to keep a loved one's body at home in the days after death.

In fact, according to UK law it's absolutely fine to keep a body at home before the funeral, presuming that all administration has been taken care of, and that the body doesn't violate public health laws. While it's now uncommon for families to look after a body at home in the run-up to the funeral, it's thought it can actually help the grieving process.

Your Hair & Nails Keep Growing After You Die

It may look like hair and nails have grown, but in reality it's just a part of the decomposition process

ANSWER: In the hours after death, the body goes through several stages. First is pallor mortis, when the skin loses its flush and takes on a paleness. Next, algor mortis begins, where the body begins to acclimatise to the temperature of the surrounding environment - usually the body cools down, but in hotter climates the temperature may rise to match the environment. The third stage is rigor mortis, where the muscles stiffen. As rigor mortis loosens, the body enters what's known as 'secondary flaccidity', where the skin shrinks back, which gives the impression that the hair and nails are growing. In reality, it's only hair and nails that were previously covered by the skin being revealed.

Myth 2

In reality, the extra hair you see is actually what was covered up by the skin

Dissecting Room 1897

In Denmark in 1950, the mummified remains of the Tollund Man, who lived during the 4th century BCE, were found so well preserved that it was initially assumed he was a recent murder victim

Myth 3

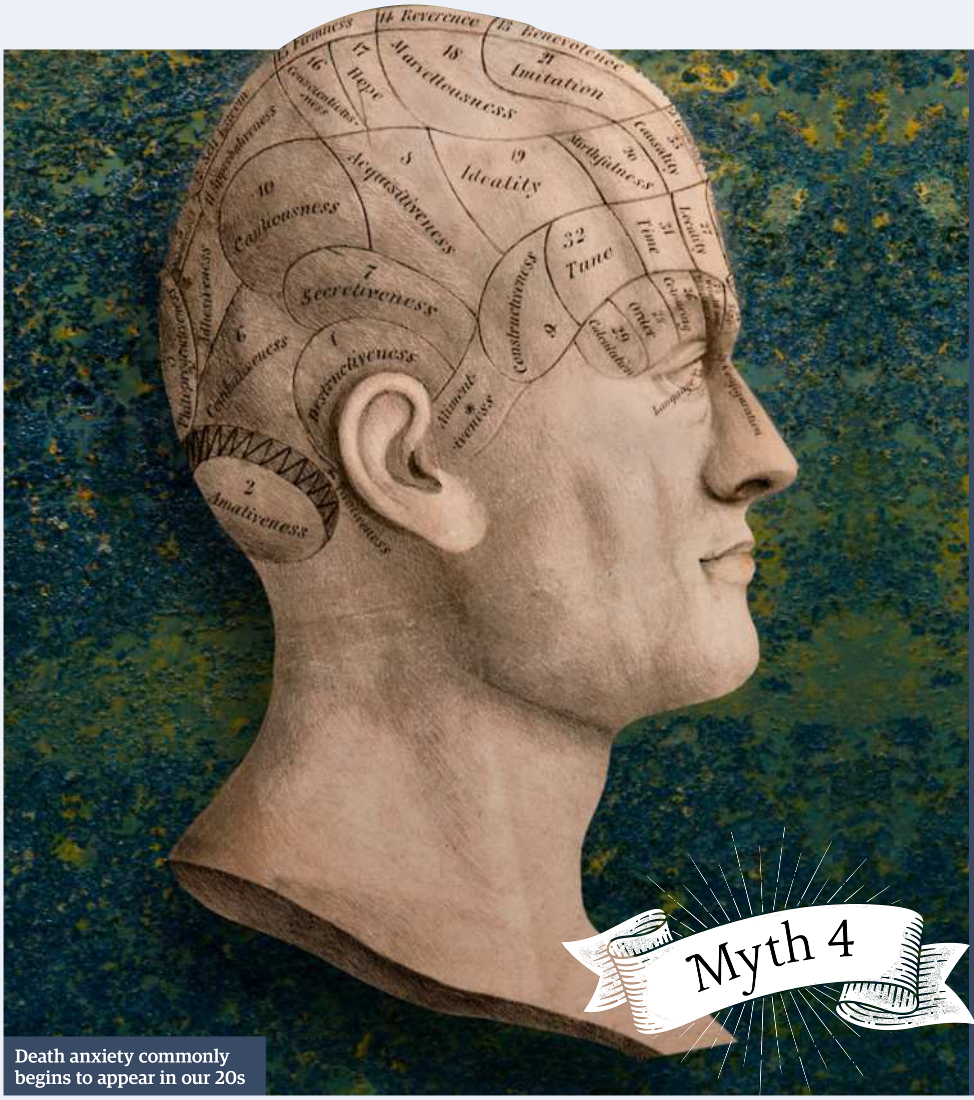
All Bodies Decompose The Same Way

The environment in which corpses lie can have a drastic affect on how they react

ANSWER: When we think of death, most people's minds jump to the stages of decay that occur after death. Decomposition is an inevitable fate for all living things once they die, but other instances of preserved remains have been known to happen. Mummified remains are often associated with the Ancient Egyptians, whose death rituals famously included preserving the dead to help them pass on to the afterlife, but the process has been known to happen naturally, too. Most natural mummies have been found in hot, arid deserts or extremely cold environments - both environments are famously dry and lacking in oxygen.

Another state in which bodies have been found preserved is known as 'adipocere', where bodies are preserved in an organic waxy, soap-like substance formed from body fat. Also known as grave wax, the process of saponification usually occurs in damp environments with little to no oxygen, such as in waterlogged ground. Usually features and wounds are very well preserved; famously, in 1913, the preserved bodies of two young brothers were found in a flooded quarry in Scotland - two years after they were murdered by their father.

Mummification and adipocere are rare; given time, most bodies will decompose. Within minutes of the body ceasing to pump blood and respire, the first stage of decomposition, autolysis, begins and the enzymes within the cells start to consume themselves. As the body cools, rigor mortis sets in, during which time chemical changes in the muscles cause the limbs to stiffen. Once the body has loosened up after several hours, the body begins the process of actively deteriorating until all that remains is the skeleton.



Death anxiety commonly begins to appear in our 20s

Thinking About Death Means There's Something Wrong With You

At some point we have all pondered our mortality

ANSWER: Perhaps you remember the first time you acknowledged your own mortality - after hearing news of a loved one's death, or after watching a documentary or reading a book - or perhaps it dawned on you slowly over time. Regardless of when you came to think about your own demise, it's something we've all considered at some point. Death anxiety is a common phenomenon, but something few will admit to experiencing due to the stigma surrounding death, particularly in Western societies. You'd expect us to become more preoccupied with death as we grow older, but research shows that death anxiety begins to rear its head between the ages of 20 and 40, and peaks between 40 and 65. For those who struggle with the prospect of death, paradoxically it might help to talk about your fears. Around the world, Death Cafes are on the rise, encouraging people to meet, drink tea, eat cake and chat openly about death. Thinking about death is absolutely normal, but, as with anything else, if you find thoughts of death consuming your every moment, speak to a medical professional.

Understanding And Processing Death

Dr John Troyer, Director of the Centre for Death and Society, and author of *Technologies Of The Human Corpse*, discusses the importance of understanding death and society's relationship with the end of life

Why do you think it's important for us to talk about death and the process of dying?
I think understanding what happens to a body – and by extension your own body after death – transforms the human corpse into an understandable human body. I should also say that I grew up this way. My father was a funeral director for 35 years in America and I understood from a very early age how death, dying and dead bodies related, especially decomposition. What I'm less sure about is if understanding decomposition is liberatory in any way – but I can vouch for its helpfulness in making fascinating conversation at the pub.

Our understanding of legal death has altered with each new technological advancement. Is the law correct to ignore a family's understanding of death over a machine's diagnosis?
The definition of death and the determination of death (which are related but different) always involve multiple human decisions. It's useful, I think, to always mull over how best to avoid a technologically determined concept of death. We humans are using the tools and interpreting the information the ways we want (and sometimes don't want) – but these are still human actions. So, should the law ignore a family's understanding of death? No. But can a machine provide data that will contribute to discussions with families watching a family member die? Yes. The machine isn't diagnosing anything. We humans are.

Do you believe that we can tell a great deal about a culture by its treatment of the dead?
Yes. An enormous number of individuals who died from COVID-19 in the US have had direct burials and in many cases during the height of the first wave the individual was buried inside the body bag. So, in the future, archaeologists and historians will try to piece together why there is this sudden strata of dead bodies buried in ways so different than before. What kind of crisis caused this sudden change? This is another way of saying that the rules for dead bodies can suddenly change when dealing with stigmatised bodies. The HIV/AIDS corpse (which I discuss in chapter three of *Technologies Of The Human Corpse*) emerged as a similar kind of abject dead body that many funeral directors didn't want to touch because of imagined (but not possible) HIV contagion.

To learn more about Dr Troyer and his research, head to his website at **www.johntroyer.com**

What Does It Feel Like to Die?

The experiences of the dying, and those who have nearly died, give the living a glimpse of what might be to come

Written by Laura Mears

For millennia, people have wondered what it might feel like to die. It is one of the most fundamental questions of human existence. And though the living can never truly know what death feels like until they experience it for themselves, we can listen to the accounts of those who have approached death and try to imagine.

In the last days of life, the body starts to shut down. The dying often become weak and sleepy, dropping in and out of consciousness as their metabolism starts to slow. This can cause a fall in body temperature, which is especially noticeable in the hands, feet and face. As the heartbeat weakens and becomes irregular, blood pressure starts to fall. The change in blood flow to the skin can alter its colour and temperature, making it pale, mottled and cold.

As the body focuses its remaining energy on vital activities, like maintaining a heartbeat, other functions start to drop away. Digestion slows down, and the muscles in the bladder and digestive system relax. Over time, thirst and appetite decrease, until eventually they disappear completely. By this point, the gut and kidneys produce little or no waste.

Changes in the body's internal chemistry have an enormous impact on the brain as people approach death. People can seem restless and agitated, and even lash out at their loved ones. They may become confused, and they may hallucinate, responding to sights and sounds that aren't really there. These so-called 'deathbed visions' are common. They often involve figures coming to collect the dying person and welcome them to the afterlife. The identities of the figures depends on the dying person's age and their culture; some are welcomed by dead friends or relatives, others by figures from their religion. Often, the figures are accompanied by a bright, welcoming light.

In some cases, deathbed visions may occur in the briefest of moments just before death. People may sit up, appear to smile in recognition, and then pass away. For others, the visions are more persistent, appearing and reappearing in the days running up to death. Accounts from the dying and their carers suggest that these prolonged visions can give people the feeling that they are at a boundary between two worlds. Often, the visions are a comfort to those who are preparing to pass.

As the end draws closer, a dying person's breathing often starts to change. In everyday life, people tend to use their diaphragm to draw air in through their nose. As death approaches, they may switch to using their chest muscles to pull air through their mouth. Their breaths may become louder, deeper and faster, and then stop for a short period before restarting again, a pattern known as Cheyne-Stokes breathing.

Eventually, a sound known as a death rattle may appear. People close to death lose their ability to swallow or cough, allowing saliva and other fluids to build up in their throat and chest. As their breath passes through the liquid, it produces a distinctive gurgling noise.

During a near-death experience, some people feel as though their mind has left their body

"From a scientific perspective, near-death experiences shouldn't really happen"

There is much that can be done to make the dying person more comfortable. Keeping their hands and feet warm with blankets and socks can help to counteract the effects of their weak circulation. Moistening their mouth with swabs and protecting their lips with balm can prevent the discomfort associated with dehydration. Morphine can reduce pain and make breathing easier.

In the final stages of dying, people often lose consciousness and become unresponsive. But, even when they've slipped into this unconscious state, they may still be able to sense what's going on around them. There are many anecdotal reports of people apparently waiting to hear the voice of a loved one before they finally let go. Experiments to track brain activity during this time have confirmed that people can still hear. The unconscious brains of dying people respond to sounds in the same way as they do when they are conscious, although whether the dying can process sounds and make sense of them remains a scientific unknown.

The final moment of life, where dying becomes death, is something of an enigma. Breathing ceases, the heart stops and brain activity comes to an end. We can never truly know what death feels like until it is our time, but, thanks to modern medicine, thousands of people who have come close to dying have survived, opening a window on the experience of 'near death'.

One in ten people who survive a cardiac arrest in hospital have a near-death experience. They tend to happen in the most seriously unwell patients, those who come closest to death, and they are eerily similar to the deathbed visions described by the dying. They often involve bright lights, tunnels, past memories and becoming disconnected from the physical body.

Near-death experiences are so common, and share so many similarities from one individual to the next, that there's a standardised survey to measure what they feel like. Known as the Greyson Scale, the survey assesses aspects of the experience. The 16 questions include: Did you see, or feel surrounded by, a brilliant light? Did you feel separated from your body? And, did you see deceased or religious spirits? Each answer carries a weight of zero, one or two points. A total score of seven is enough to count as a near-death experience, though most rank higher than that.

The troubling thing about near-death experiences from a scientific perspective is that they shouldn't really happen. When the heart stops beating, the blood pressure plummets almost instantly. From that moment, a person has between two and 20 seconds before they lose consciousness. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) can help to maintain some circulation. But, even during chest compressions, blood pressure remains well below normal levels.

The brain normally receives 15% of the blood pumped by the heart, but without pressure to drive the fluid through the capillaries, the cells become starved of oxygen and carbon dioxide starts to build up.

Electroencephalograms (EEGs), which measure the electrical activity in the brain, show that as soon as the heart stops, brain activity slows. Within a few seconds, it completely flatlines. Fundamental reflexes, like the pupils constricting in response to bright light, disappear.

The brains of people who have near-death experiences essentially switch off. These people shouldn't be capable of conscious thought, and they certainly shouldn't be able to recall details of their own resuscitation.

Science can explain some aspects of a near-death experience. As blood flow to the eyes decreases, the vision starts to go. This tends to happen from the outside-in, creating the illusion of a light at the end of a tunnel. Endorphins released by the body during times of stress trigger feelings of peace and euphoria. Hospital drugs can induce hallucinations, and a build-up of carbon dioxide in the blood can make people feel as though they are floating. But the vivid conscious experiences patients describe are a puzzle.

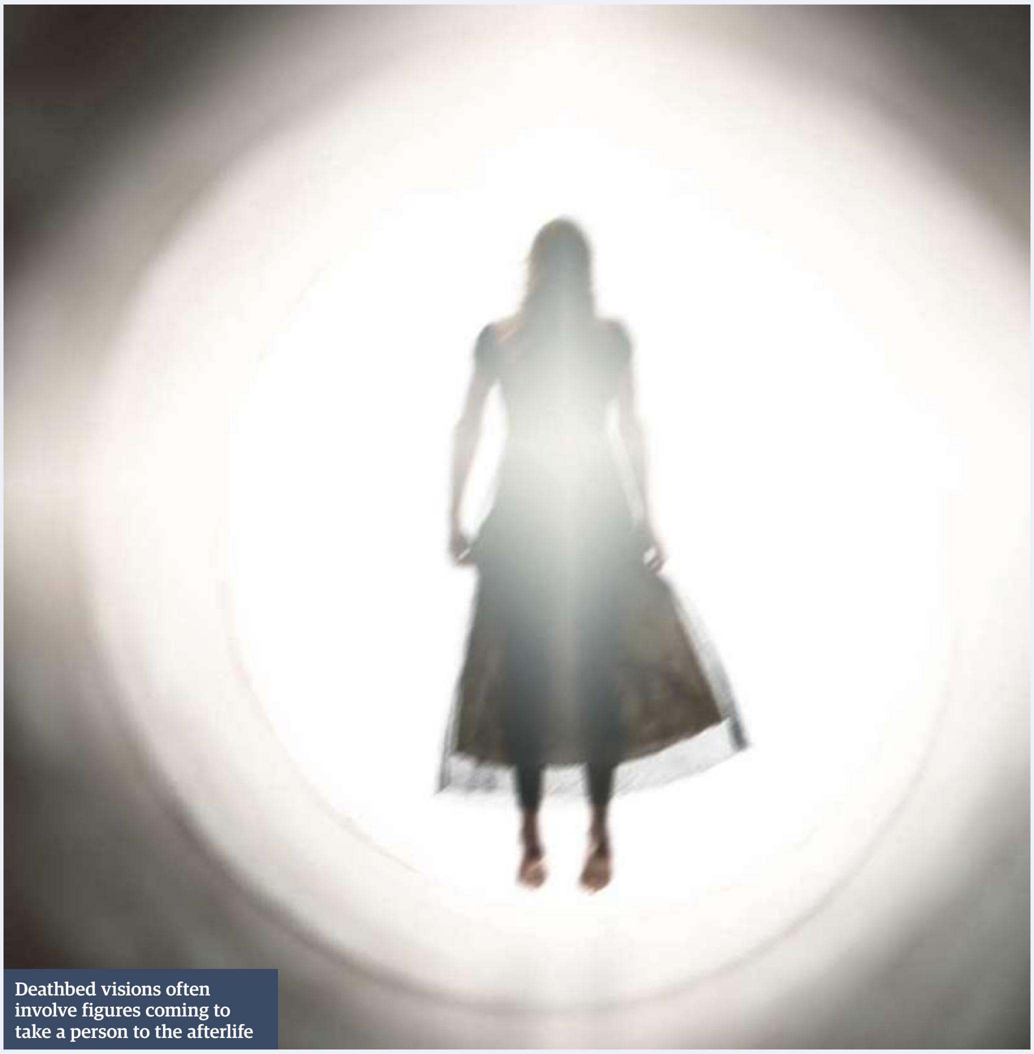
To try to pinpoint the chemical cause, scientists compared the language people use to describe near-death experiences with the language people use to describe experiences induced by psycho-active drugs. The best match was the hallucinogen, ketamine. Ketamine interacts with brain cells via a receptor called NMDA, blocking their ability to detect a natural chemical signal called glutamate. This block results in dissociation, hallucination and euphoria - the same feelings described by those who've had a near-death experience.

Conventional science suggests that complex experiences like these require consciousness. But consciousness requires the coordinated effort of many distant brain regions, and, when oxygen in the brain drops and carbon dioxide rises, this coordination disappears.

Scientists expect the thoughts of patients experiencing a cardiac arrest to be very confused, but in reality, they seem to be extremely coherent.

One possibility is that near-death experiences don't really occur during the period where the heart has stopped, but immediately before or after. Experiments in rats have shown that, just before brain activity flatlines, there is an enormous burst of electricity. It may be that most of the near-death experience happens in this brief moment. But this explanation is incomplete. During a cardiac arrest, the part of the brain that lays down memories (the hippocampus) is often damaged, which should cause amnesia.

Another possibility is that consciousness is not entirely caused by electrical activity in the brain. It is even possible that the mind and the brain are not the same thing.



Deathbed visions often involve figures coming to take a person to the afterlife

"Many who survive cardiac arrest are not well enough for an interview afterwards"

Scientists are keen to explore this further, and to find out why people seem to be able to have conscious experiences when their brains look like they aren't switched on. However, designing experiments to tackle these questions is challenging.

One approach is to plant pictures or objects on shelves high above the beds of patients at risk of cardiac arrest, in locations impossible to see from the ground. If people truly do float out of their own bodies and observe themselves from afar during resuscitation, those objects should come into view.

One of the challenges with experiments like these is that most cardiac arrest patients don't survive. And, of those that do, many are not well enough for an interview immediately afterwards.

In one study of 2,060 cardiac arrest patients, only 101 were alive and well enough for interviews about their experience. Just 9% had near-death experiences, while 2% had what could be termed out-of-body experiences.

Only one patient completed the study interview. Unfortunately, that patient wasn't near any of the planted images at the time of his cardiac arrest. He was, however, able to describe his resuscitation to a level of detail that left his doctors baffled.

Near-death experiences walk a very fine line between the spiritual and the scientific. Science has worked out many pieces of the near-death experience puzzle, but there are still large gaps in our understanding. One of the major open questions is: why do different people's experiences share such striking similarities? Is it a reflection of what death actually feels like, or does it have more to do with the stories we tell each other about what death should feel like?

Either way, we can take comfort in the fact that deathbed visions and near-death experiences are overwhelmingly positive. For those that return from the brink of death, the experience can be life-changing. And, for the rest of us, the stories we hear about positive near-death experiences can bring a sense of relief in a time of great sorrow.

Around one in ten cardiac arrest patients has a near-death experience

Dying vs Death

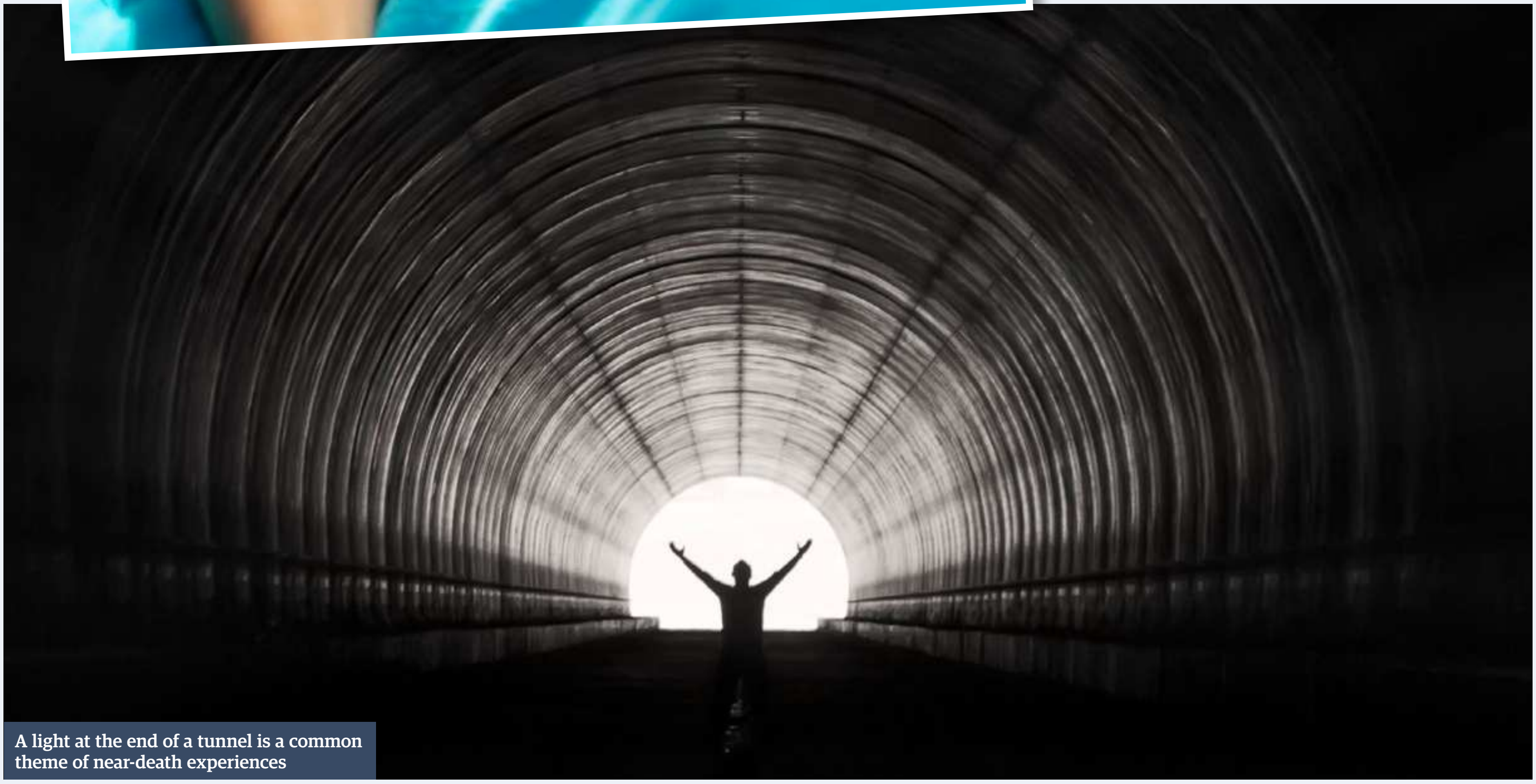
How can we know what death feels like if we don't know what death is?

The moment of death is hard to pinpoint exactly. For most of history, if a person stopped breathing and their heart stopped, they were dead. The rest of their organs would rapidly fail, and there was nothing anyone could do to revive them. But now, doctors can restart the heart with a defibrillator and support the lungs with a ventilator. So, modern medical definitions of death have had to adapt.

Now, in most countries, death is the point at which the brain is dead: when a person has irreversibly lost both consciousness and their ability to breathe on their own. For most people, brain death coincides with cardiopulmonary death: when the heart and lungs stop working, the brain dies. But for people on life support, the distinction between dying and death can blur. In fact, the line is so blurry that it's an active area of ethical and philosophical debate.

One of the arguments surrounds the distinction between the death of the person and the organism. A human on life support can still do many things, such as growing hair and digesting food. The organism is still alive. But, if they can't regain consciousness, is the person still alive too?

Modern medicine can keep the body alive after the brain has died

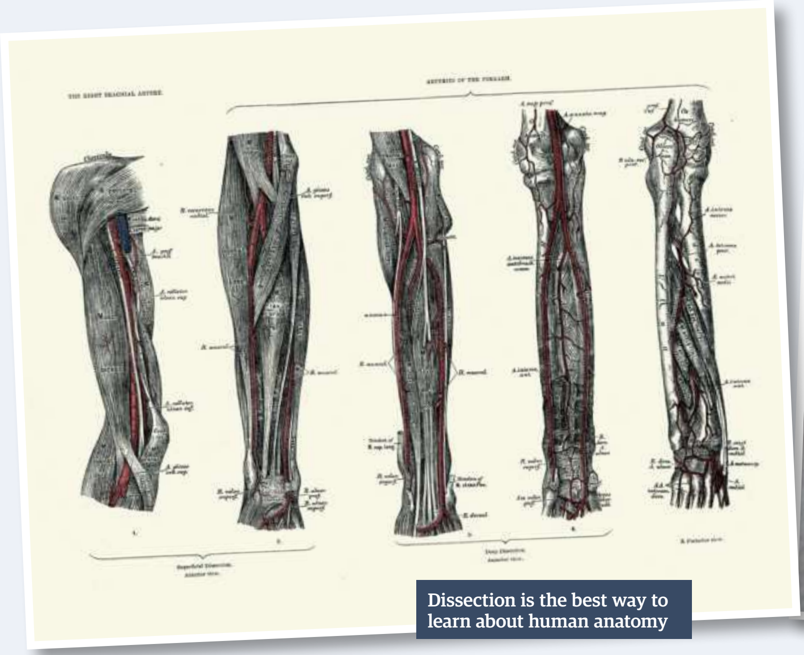


A light at the end of a tunnel is a common theme of near-death experiences

Donating Your Body to Science

What happens to your remains after you die depends on how you choose to donate

Written by Laura Mears



Dissection is the best way to learn about human anatomy

Students dissect cadavers on specialist autopsy tables

Anatomical Examination

Cadaveric dissection is a rite of passage for medical students

The most ancient, and still the most common, use for donated bodies is the study of human anatomy. Hands-on dissection experience is the gold-standard when it comes to learning the complexities of the human body. It provides student doctors with the opportunity to safely examine the body's structures up close before they encounter their first patients.

It takes months to thoroughly examine a cadaver, so donated bodies are first embalmed in formaldehyde. This halts decay by changing the structure of the body's proteins, making it impossible for bacteria to break them down.

Prior to each session, students use books to familiarise themselves with the structures they're likely to see. Then, they work with trained demonstrators to perform the dissection. Each cut is made with care, beginning with a lesson in how to properly slice the skin to expose the muscle without causing damage. At the end of each session, everything is carefully replaced.

Over the course of their training, medical students learn the names and locations of every bone, organ, muscle, major nerve, and blood vessel. They also examine X-rays and CT scans, matching up pictures they'll see in the clinic with the real organs inside a real body.

The only information students get about the cadavers are their age and cause of death. These details help them to make sense of the anatomy in front of them, while preserving the anonymity and dignity of each donor. One of the major advantages of learning in this way is that every human body is unique. Comparing one cadaver to another allows students to see the natural variation in our internal anatomy up close.

At the end, bodies are released for cremation. Their ashes are then returned to their families or scattered at a dedicated site. Many medical schools hold remembrance services to acknowledge the incredible gift given by these donors.

Trauma Testing

Pushing the human body to its limits reveals how and why injuries occur

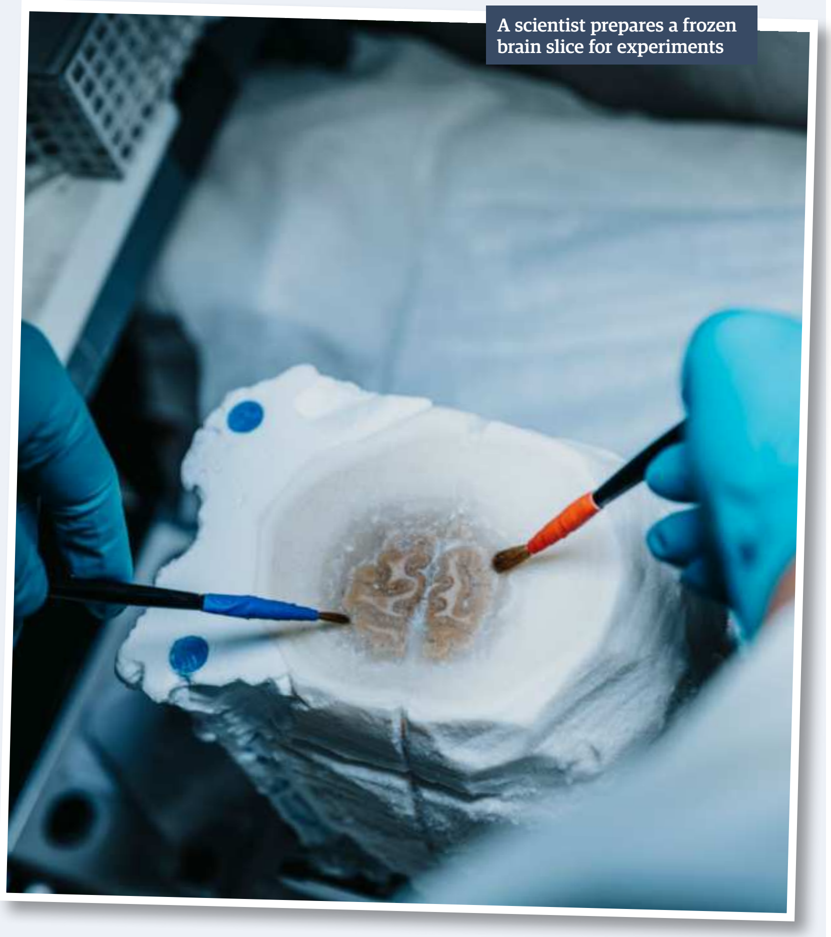
Cadavers are no longer used as crash test dummies, but they do form a critical part of biomechanical trauma research. Scientists working in this field seek to understand the limits of the human body. This helps them to find out how and why injuries occur when those limits are breached.

Cadaver trauma research involves subjecting bodies, or parts of bodies, to injuries that mimic real human trauma. This might be compression of a leg bone to simulate a car hitting a pedestrian, or a blow to the skull to simulate a weapon strike.

Measurements taken during and after each simulation allow scientists to match mechanical data with physical injuries. Revealing, for example, the force required to create a particular pattern of fractures in a bone, or the risk of rupturing the body's largest blood vessel following different types of blow to the chest.

Trauma researchers simulate accidents to test the limits of the human body

Simulated weapon strikes reveal how bones are most likely to break



A scientist prepares a frozen brain slice for experiments

Brain Mapping

Post-mortem dissection is one of the only ways researchers can learn about the brain

Dissection after death is often the only way scientists can learn about the causes of neurological diseases. This is because it is almost impossible for doctors to perform a close examination of the living brain. Access to this precious tissue allows scientists to explore what causes brain disease, and how best to treat it.

Brain donors often have neurological conditions, but not always. To truly understand what a disease does to the brain, scientists need to be able to compare diseased brains with healthy brains. This allows them to literally spot the difference.

When the time comes to add a new brain to the brain bank, the team has around 72 hours to preserve the delicate organ. First, the brain is sliced in two from front to back, separating it into the left and right hemispheres. Then, the two sides are prepared for storage. One side remains whole, preserved in formaldehyde, while the other side is dissected into pieces and frozen down to -80 degrees Celsius (-112 degrees Fahrenheit).

Pathologists examine the preserved side of the brain closely for signs of illness, cross-referencing what they see with details about the donor. Many donors with neurological conditions join research studies before they die, allowing doctors to gather detailed medical history, including tests and scans, to accompany their donated tissue.

Once an official diagnosis has been made, the frozen side of the brain can then be used for research. Experiments can include examining slices of the tissue under the microscope, or breaking the cells open to extract and sequence their genetic code.

Surgeons use cadavers to practice fitting devices like pacemakers and stents.

Surgical Simulation

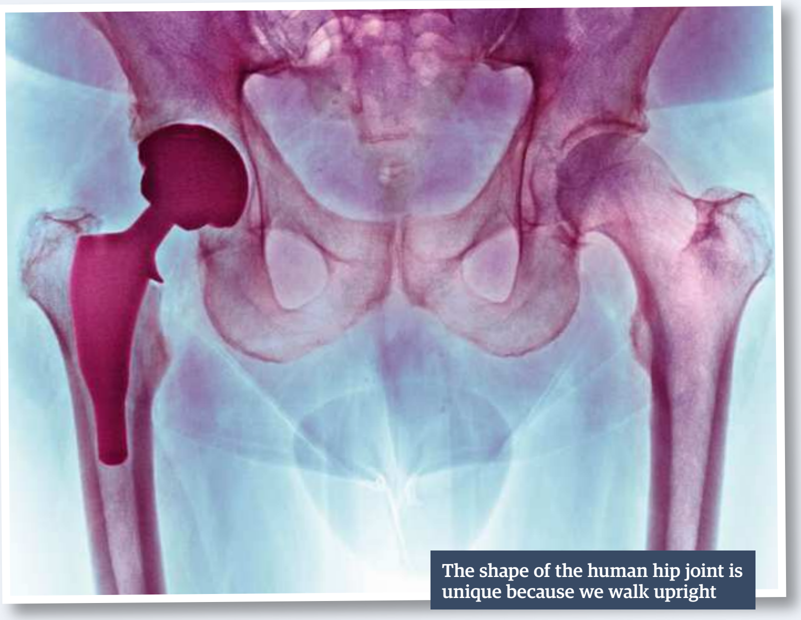
Practising tricky techniques on corpses prepares doctors for real emergencies

The safest and most effective way for surgeons to train is under the supervision of experienced doctors in hospitals. But cadavers can provide trainees with an extra chance to test out complex procedures before they scrub up for the operating theatre.

One of the main benefits is the chance to practise rare or difficult techniques, like inserting a brand-new medical device, or simulating a surgical emergency. Complications in surgery are rare, so trainees don't always get the chance to observe them in real life.

Embalmed cadavers look and feel different to living bodies so, for the most realistic experience, bodies destined for surgical training are frozen rather than fixed in formaldehyde. This means that they only last a few days, so training schedules have to be carefully planned to maximise the amount of teaching each donated body can provide.

Cadavers allow trainee surgeons to practise procedures, like hernia repairs


The shape of the human hip joint is unique because we walk upright

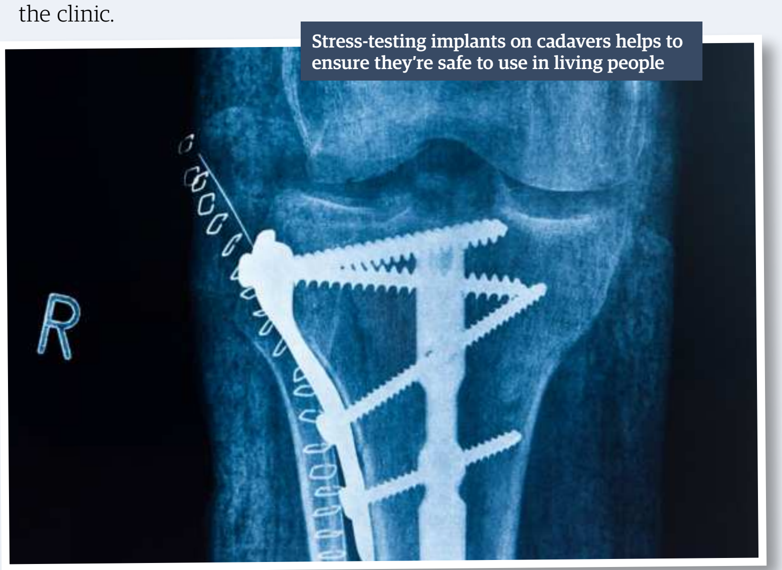
Implant Development

Fitting new implants to donated bodies allows designers to test their fit and function

The human body is completely unique in nature; no other animal has an anatomy like ours. So, when it comes to designing and testing new medical implants, inventors can have a hard time making sure that their products work as intended.

It is sometimes possible to test new medical devices on animals; pig hearts, for example, are very like our own. But certain organs and tissues have no match in the animal kingdom. These include the human ear, nose, and throat, and the spine, hips, and legs.

Testing new technologies on cadavers not only helps engineers to fit implants to the unique shape of the human body. It also allows them to perform stress-tests that would be impossible in living people, for example, determining the mechanical force a screw can take before a bone breaks. This helps to ensure that implants are safe for use by the time they reach the clinic.



Stress-testing implants on cadavers helps to ensure they're safe to use in living people

“A human corpse gives off around 800 different types of scent molecule”

The smell of a body changes as decomposition progresses

Cadaver Dog Training

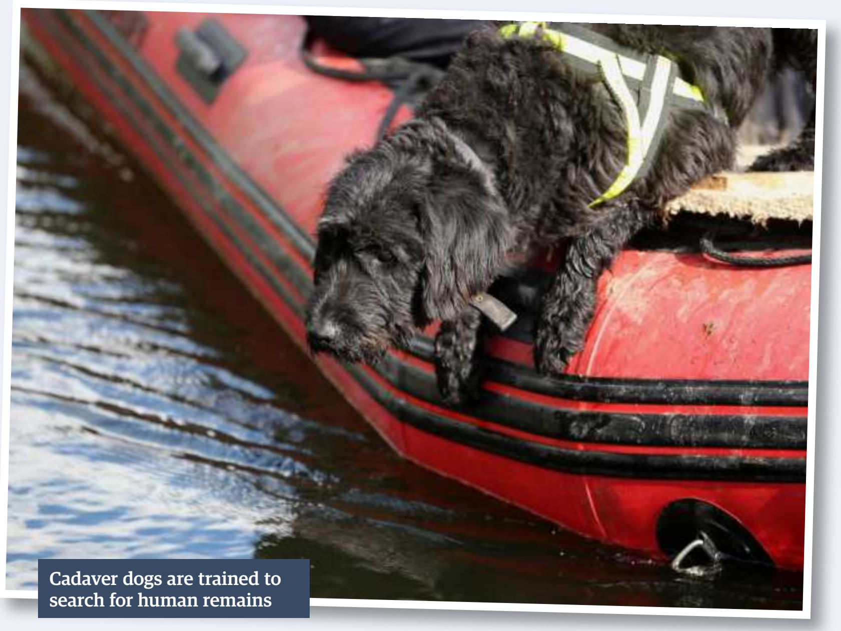
The scent of human decomposition guides dogs towards hidden bodies

Human remains detection dogs, or cadaver dogs, are scent dogs trained to recognise the smell of human decomposition. They help their handlers to find bodies and body parts during murder investigations, accidents, suicides, and disasters.

It is rare for cadaver dogs to train using real human tissues for ethical reasons, so many train using animal products like pork. But, the scent profile of decaying animals is very different from that of a human body.

A human corpse gives off around 800 different types of scent molecule. These vary depending on the location of the body, the temperature, the humidity, and the insects and microorganisms present. They also change over time. This makes selecting the right scents for dog training particularly challenging. In the field, the smell of dead animals, and even mushrooms, can distract cadaver dogs at work.

Research has found that some of the best training materials for cadaver dogs are cloth and soil that have been in contact with human remains. Some trainers also use a device called a ‘scent transfer unit’, which contains a piece of gauze designed to trap odours from the air around a decaying body. It can capture up to 85% of the scent chemicals released by a corpse. Research is ongoing to discover which of those chemicals are unique to human decomposition. Extracting them, and recreating them synthetically, could help dogs to work even more effectively.



Cadaver dogs are trained to search for human remains

Decomposition Monitoring

Body farms reveal what happens to human remains as they break down

Body farms are specialist sites where forensic anthropologists study the decomposition of human remains. It might sound macabre, but this kind of research provides critical insights that can help to identify the victims of accidental trauma or violent crime.

Normally, when people die, their bodies are cared for by undertakers or morticians, kept cool, embalmed, and then buried or cremated. But, if someone suffers an accident, or is the victim of a crime, and their body is not discovered, it can begin to decay. This can make it hard to find out who they were and what happened to them.

Human bodies decompose in different ways depending on their environment: the temperature, oxygen levels, acidity, humidity, light level, and how they are wrapped or clothed. Understanding the stages of decomposition under different conditions allows scientists to work out when, where, and how a person died.

Bodies destined for body farms are tested for infectious disease to ensure that they aren't a risk to the scientists or local community. They are then catalogued, before being placed in their location on the site. This may be in a shallow grave, submerged in water, or in the boot of a car. Scientists pay special attention to every detail of the burial, because any change could affect how decomposition progresses.

Then, over the coming hours, days, weeks, or even months, forensic scientists begin to take samples and make records, not only of the bodies themselves, but of their surroundings.

Understanding the chemical signatures left by a decaying body allows scientists to find new ways to detect and identify clandestine remains. For example, bodies release ions, which can change the pH of the surrounding soil, and nitrogen and phosphate, which kill local plant life.

Decaying bodies also attract insects, which arrive at predictable intervals, and go through life cycles of known lengths. Cross-referencing soil, plant, and insect data with local weather can reveal how different conditions affect the speed of decay. This can help the police to work out how long a real victim's body has been hidden.

> "Human bodies decompose in different ways depending on their environment"

Flesh flies arrive at a body only once it has already started to decay

Researchers can find out a lot about a person by looking at their remains

Some tissue banks handle highly infectious materials, like body fluids carrying the SARS-CoV 2 coronavirus

Tissue Analysis

Tissue banks store cells, organs, and body fluids for research into health and disease

When people donate their bodies to science, they don't necessarily stay in one piece. Many scientists work on specific parts of the human body, and only need access to certain organs or tissues for their research. Research tissue banks, or biobanks, provide safe storage for these body parts, allowing scientists to access them for their experiments.

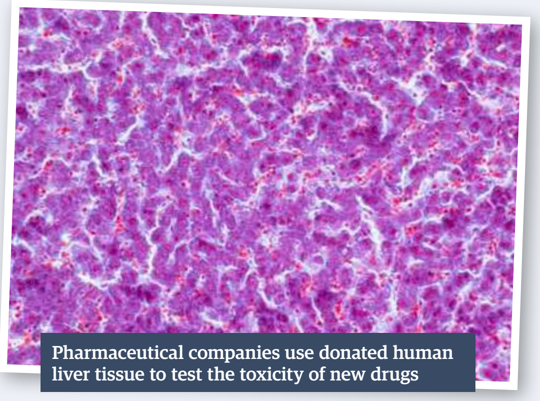
Almost every human tissue can be harvested and stored at a tissue bank, but some only accept tissues related to a specific disease, like breast cancer. Tissue banks can also store cells, including stem cells, tumour cells, and fat cells, or body fluids, like blood or urine.

Tissue harvesting has to happen as soon as possible after death, often within 24 hours, to ensure that samples are fresh. They can then be stored in one of three ways: fresh, frozen, or fixed.

Scientists need to use fresh samples the same day. Within that time frame, most of the cells will still be alive and able to perform their normal roles. For example, the liver is the body's detoxification organ, responsible for breaking down chemicals. A fresh liver sample is still capable of performing this job. Applying a new drug to donated liver tissue can reveal how the body will break that drug down, uncovering any toxic by-products before the drug is tested on humans.

Frozen samples last much longer than fresh, remaining usable for tens of years if stored at a low enough temperature. Tissue banks prepare them by plunging small pieces of tissue, vials of cells, or tubes of fluid into liquid nitrogen. This rapidly drops the temperature of the samples down to -180 degrees Celsius (-292 degrees Fahrenheit), preventing ice crystal formation. This preserves the cells, and the proteins and genetic code they contain, allowing scientists to examine them in the future.

Fixed samples last the longest of all, some for more than a century. Scientists prepare them by soaking the tissue in chemicals to completely halt the decomposition process. Then, they embed the preserved samples in paraffin wax, transforming soft tissues into solid blocks. Scientists can then cut these blocks into wafer-thin slices to study their structure under a microscope.



Pharmaceutical companies use donated human liver tissue to test the toxicity of new drugs

Death Through History

34 The Ancient Egyptian Underworld

We explore the death rites and rituals of the pharaohs and how they evolved over the centuries to reveal changing ideas of life, death and the afterlife

44 The Ancient Greek Underworld

The ghosts of the dead are imprisoned for eternity in a dark, sunless realm full of monstrous supernatural beings, where nothing will ever change

50 Celts: Cult Of Death

From human sacrifice to headhunting, the Celts had a ferocious reputation in the ancient world and a vivid vision of the afterlife

58 Viking Dead: Myths and Practices

From valkyries to Valhalla, how the Vikings saw the world to come

66 Changing Attitudes To Death

How attitudes to death evolved over The Enlightenment

74 The Victorian Cult Of Death

From superstitions to strange rituals, lift the veil on the fascinating and macabre ways the Victorians dealt with mortality

82 Memento Mori

Inside the disturbing world of Victorian post-mortem photography

86 Better Dying Through Chemistry

Preserving the dead was developed during the American Civil War and had a lasting impact on military and civilian funerals through the modern era

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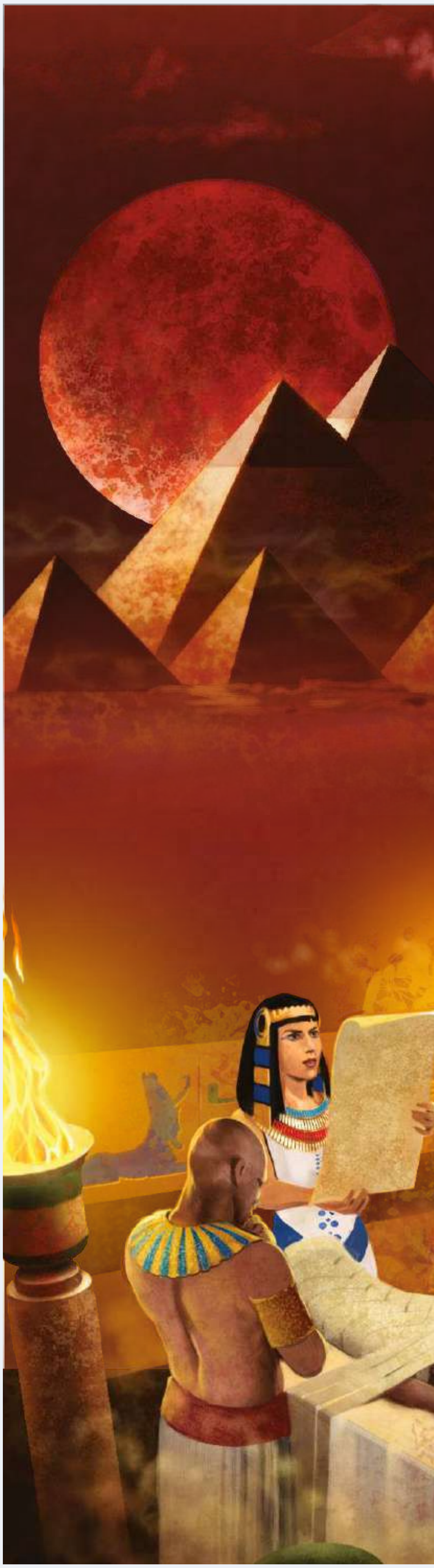


The Ancient Egyptian Underwold

We explore the death rites and rituals of the pharaohs and how they evolved over the centuries to reveal changing ideas of life, death and the afterlife

Written by Dr Charlotte Booth

The Egyptian underworld, known by many names (including Amduat or Field of Reeds), is a dark and frightening place populated by demons, anti-animals and deities.

Descriptions of the underworld are found in numerous funerary texts painted onto the walls of tombs, coffins, funerary objects and papyri. The descriptions vary across the texts although the general premise is that the deceased travelled through the Amduat and would be reborn should specific rituals be carried out adequately.

The contents of the funerary texts evolved over the thousands of years of Egyptian history. However, all of the texts were laid out as a series of hundreds of spells or utterances and were not designed to be read as a continuous text. Spells for preparing the deceased for the afterlife could be used in isolation and out of sequence (i.e. instructions for hour one do not need to be next to hour two) and it is very rare for entire copies of the texts to be discovered in one place.

There are numerous texts, however, dating back as far as the 24th century BCE and each offers a different insight into the evolving relationship ancient Egyptians had with death and the world beyond. They feared it, revered it and built gigantic monuments to it. What's more, it is clear that death was not seen as the end, but rather an important junction in the life of a soul. It seems only right that we should tackle it with no less care and deference here.

Pyramid Texts

The earliest funerary texts we have are the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts and unlike later texts they did not include images, consisting purely of hieroglyphic text. The underworld described in the Pyramid Texts was very similar to the landscape of Egypt itself with rivers and fields, abundant with crops. The idea of the deceased king and the solar god travelling through this landscape on a boat that these texts described is one that remained central to the beliefs concerning rebirth of the deceased as well as the cycle of the Sun in the centuries that followed. In this context rebirth or resurrection was intended to mean being reborn into the afterlife rather than into a physical form back on Earth. The earliest example of the Pyramid Texts is in the pyramid of Unas of the fifth dynasty (2735-2345 BCE) and they remained in use until the reign of Ibi, eighth dynasty (2181-2161 BCE). The texts were only inscribed in the burial and antechamber of the pyramid.

© Joe Cummings

The Pyramid Texts introduce the association between the deceased king and Osiris, the god of the Underworld. In later periods every deceased individual was also referred to as 'The Osiris'. The Pyramid Texts also show a very close association between the deceased and the sun-god Ra as well as introducing the theme of the king's ascent to the stars. Utterance 461 of the Pyramid Texts describes the king becoming a star and ruling eternally from the sky from amongst his ancestors.

"O King, may you ascend as the morning star, may you be rowed as the lake dweller, may those who are in the abyss be afraid of you, may you give orders to the spirit … The doors of the sky are open to you, the doors of the firmament are thrown open for you, that you may travel by boat to the Field of rushes, that you may cultivate barley, that you may reap emmer and prepare your sustenance therefrom like Horus the son of Atum."

The afterlife described within these texts was initially only for the king, although by the end of the Old Kingdom some chapters were also used in non-royal tombs.

The Coffin Texts

This movement away from an exclusively royal afterlife led to the Pyramid Texts evolving into the Middle Kingdom (2040-17782 BCE) Coffin Texts. These texts appeared in both royal and non-royal tombs but maintained the landscape of the afterlife as being similar to the Utopian idea of Egypt with verdant fields and glistening rivers.

The Coffin Texts, as the name suggests, were primarily inscribed on coffins but there was greater flexibility in how these funeral rights were being applied and therefore also appeared on tomb walls, mummy masks, and papyri.

Traditional rituals introduced in the Pyramid Texts, such as the Offering Ritual, in which offerings of food, drink, clothing and ointment were made to the deceased, evolved into a pictorial offering list known as the frieze of objects. This ensured the dead had food and belongings for all of eternity.

There was also a greater emphasis in the Coffin Texts on the heavenly travels of the ba (a human-headed bird that represents the mobility of the soul), the nourishment of the ka (the life force of a person) and the preservation of the human remains to ensure they all united in the afterlife.

Included in the Coffin Texts was a collection of additional Guides to the Hereafter, the most useful of which was the Book of the Two Ways, which actually included a very helpful map of the underworld.

This map was painted on the base of coffins and depicted two paths: earth and water. The map outlines some of the dangers the deceased will face on their journey to rebirth, which include knife-wielding demons, lakes of fire, and gates guarded by gate keepers that the deceased needed to name to pass. The idea was that having these maps depicted on tombs and coffins would assist the dead in navigating these numerous hazards and trials so that they might find rebirth more easily.

> "This terrible land where overturned stars fall on their faces and know not how to raise themselves again"

Ultimately these paths represented tests that would prove the value of a person's soul and their suitability to be reborn and receive an afterlife at all. While they might meet demons and monsters, they were not passing through hell as some might think - there was only one afterlife. The true punishment for living a bad life or failing these trials was not eternal hellfire as later religions would depict, but simply ceasing to exist at all.

The Book Of The Dead

In the New Kingdom (1570-1070 BCE) a number of new books were introduced that greatly expanded the understanding of the afterlife and to prepare the dead for their journey with incantations to keep them safe. The most well-known is the so-called Book of the Dead or, as it might be more accurately translated, Spells for Going Forth by Day. There were between 189 and 192 spells contained in the Book and these were based on themes introduced in the Pyramid and Coffin Texts.

The Book of Going Forth by Day was popular with both royal and non-royal members of society and was written by a number of different priests

What Is Human

An Egyptian guide to what makes a person

The Egyptians believed a human was made up of six components that needed to unite in the afterlife in order to be reborn successfully. These elements were:

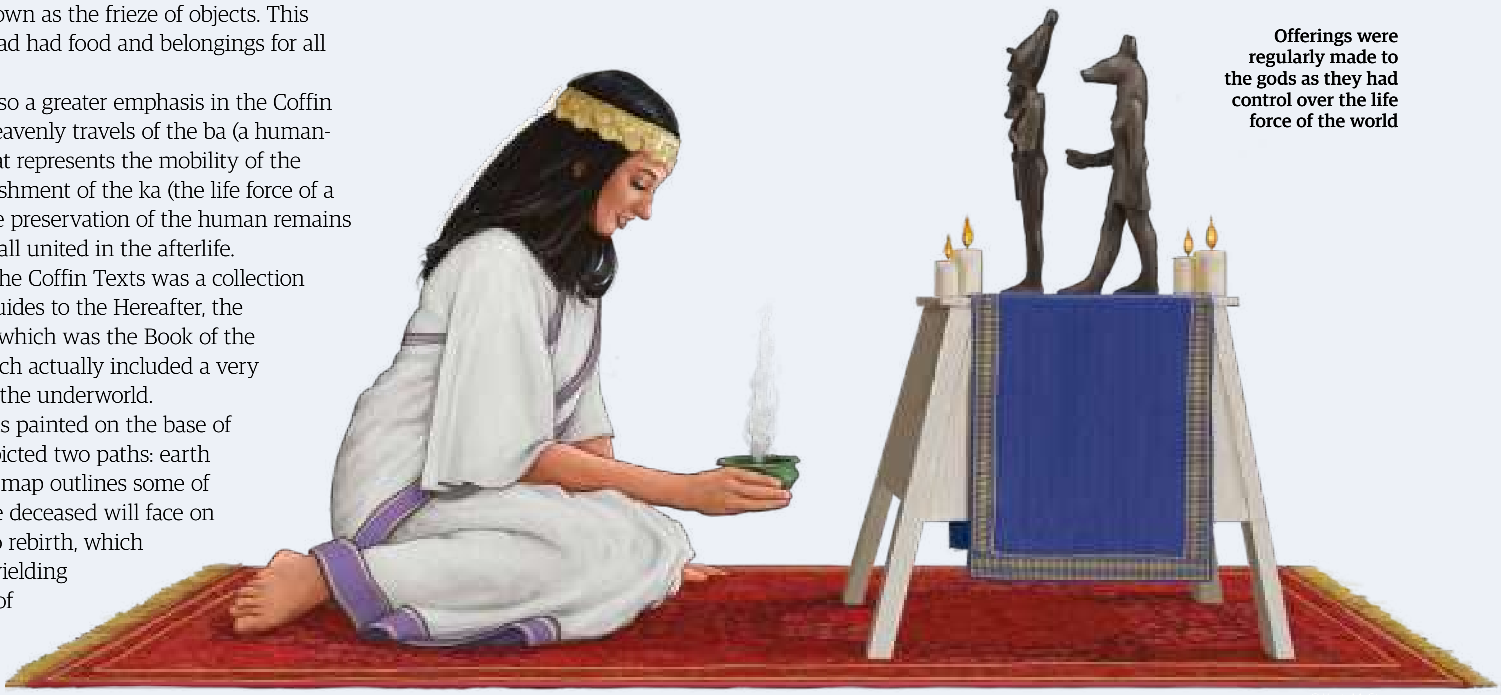
1 ***The physical body,*** which was preserved through mummification.

2 ***The name*** of an individual, which was a powerful weapon. Many of the spells in the funerary texts name various components of demons and their weapons giving the deceased power over them.

3 ***The shadow*** is a confusing element described in the funerary texts as a powerful entity to be protected. When the sun sets/dies, the shadow disappears only to be reborn in the morning. Therefore if the deceased individual has a shadow it shows the presence of the sun.

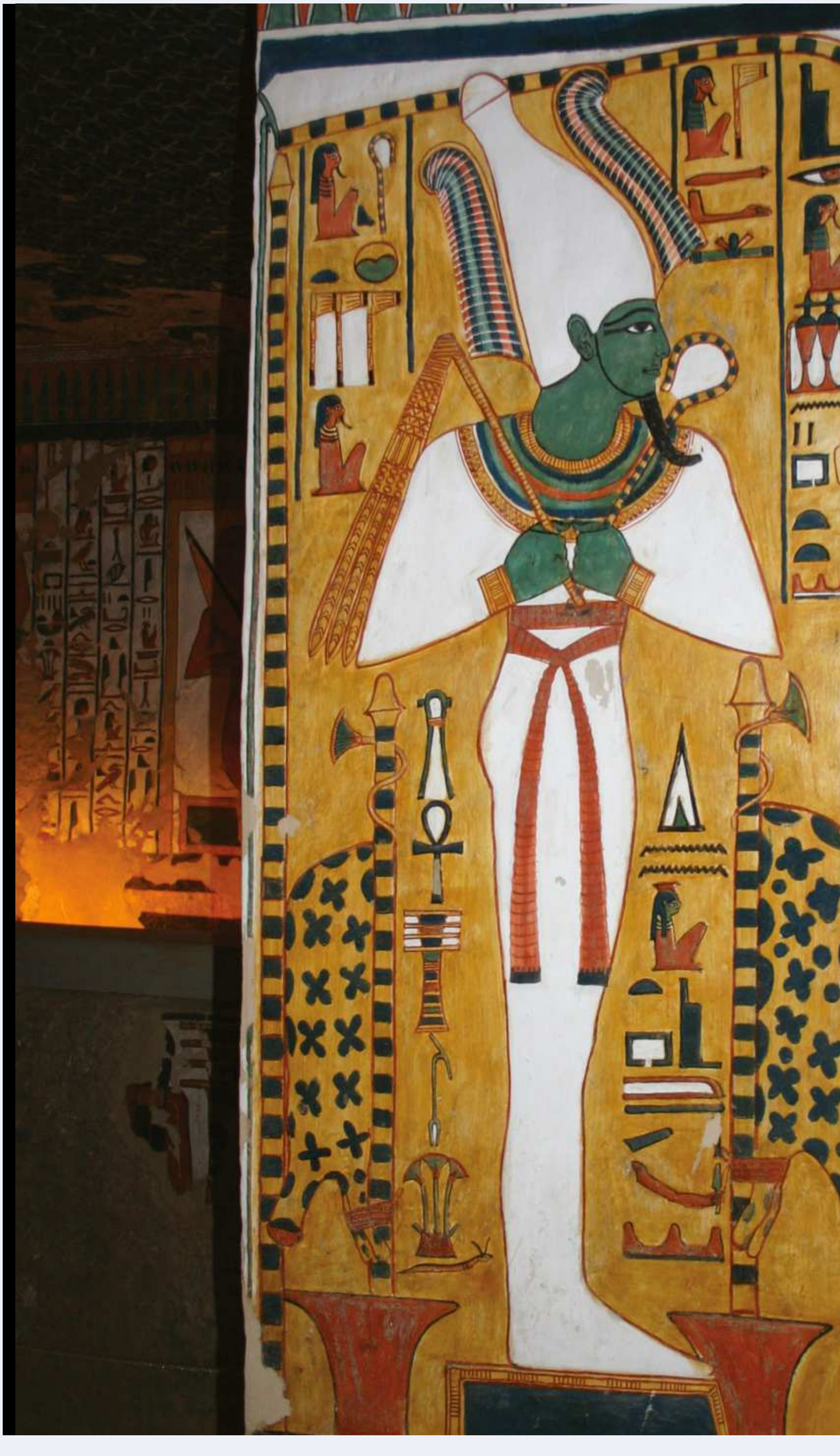
4 ***The ba*** was depicted as a human headed bird sometimes with arms. This bird form allowed the spirit of the deceased to physically move from the burial chamber to the tomb and constituted the most mobile aspect of the human spirit.

5 ***The ka*** was the life-force of a human and was the focus of the offerings given to the deceased. It was created at the same time as the body at the start of life and remained with the body until death.

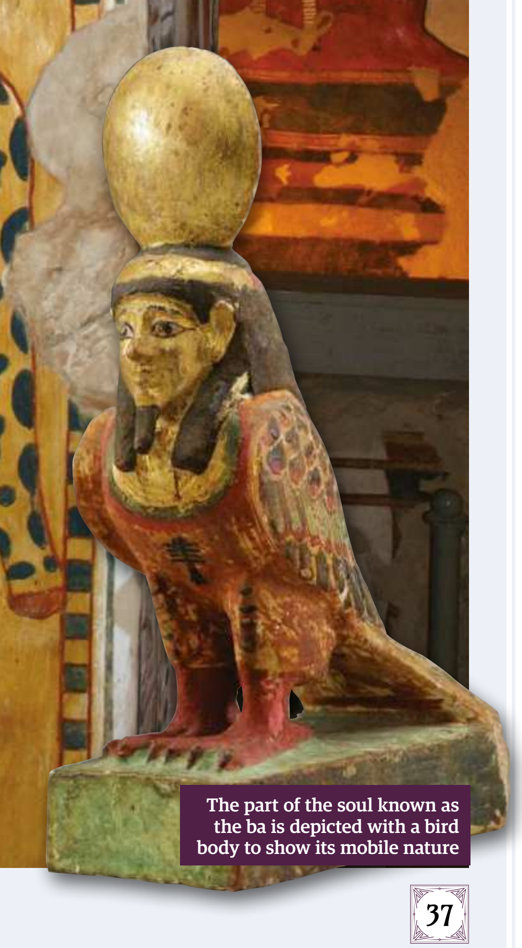


Offerings were regularly made to the gods as they had control over the life force of the world

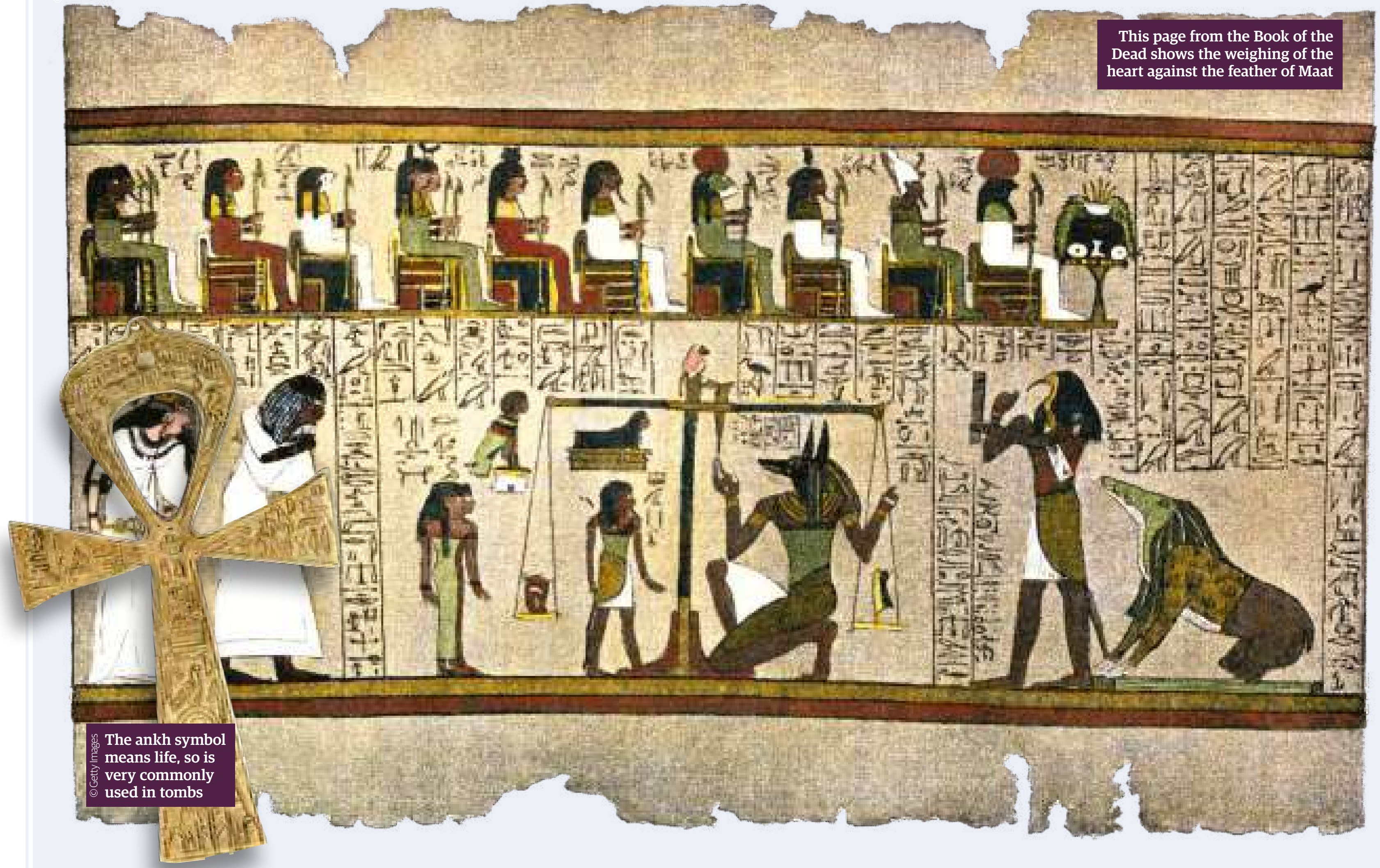
© Kevin McGivern



A painting of Osiris inside the tomb of Nefertari



The part of the soul known as the ba is depicted with a bird body to show its mobile nature



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This page from the Book of the Dead shows the weighing of the heart against the feather of Maat

The ankh symbol means life, so is very commonly used in tombs

© Getty Images

over 1,000 years. The idea behind it was to see the dead return by day from the underworld

One of the key scenes to be introduced in the Book of Going Forth by Day was Spell 125, which is commonly known as the Negative Confession. This spell was recited by the deceased before their heart was weighed against the feather of truth representing the goddess Maat by Anubis, guardian of the scales. This was a symbolic judging of the good and bad deeds of a person's life, that their heart be weighed against the very concepts of truth, morality and justice.

The premise behind spell 125 is that the deceased listed everything they hadn't done, omitting anything that had been done. An example of the 'crimes' not committed includes:

"I have done no falsehood, I have not robbed, … I have not stolen, I have not killed men, I have not destroyed food supplies, I have done no crookedness, I have not stolen god's offerings, I have not told lies, I have not taken food, I have not been sullen, I have not transgressed, I have not killed a sacred bull, I have not committed perjury, I have not stolen bread, I have not eavesdropped."

As you can see, the Negative Confession combines trivial and terrible crimes together suggesting they were weighted the same in the heart of the deceased. As an 'insurance' policy against any crimes committed but not mentioned, a Heart Scarab was placed over the heart of the deceased. This was inscribed with spell 30b of the Book of Going Forth by Day:

"Do not stand against me as witness beside the lords of the ritual,
Do not say against me, he did do it, about my actions,
Do not make a case against me beside the great god,
Tell my goodness to Ra, hand me to Nehebkau."

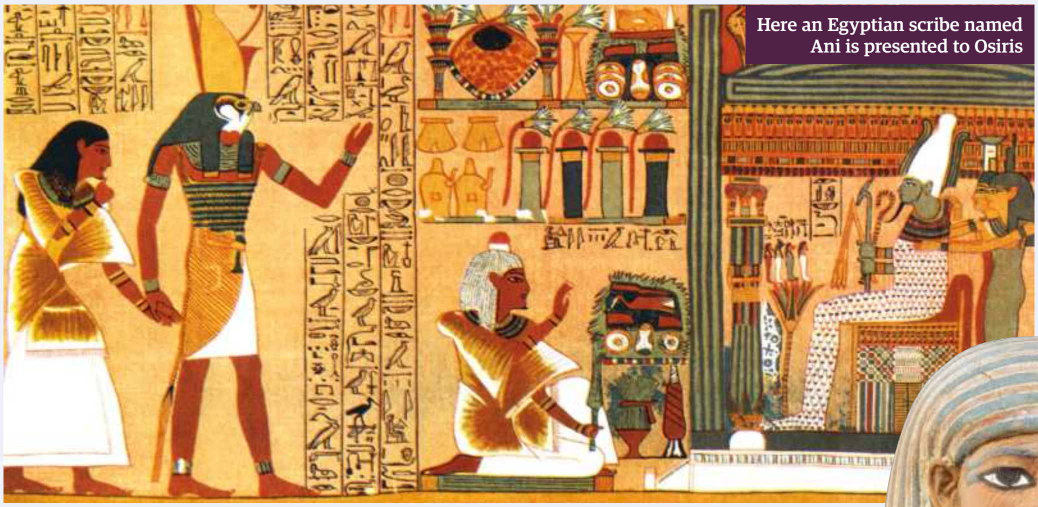
Following the confession the deceased is led to the scales in the Hall of the God of the Underworld, where the Weighing of the Heart takes place. The god Osiris oversees the ritual. Anubis, the god of embalming, is shown levelling the scales and Thoth, the ibis-headed god of writing and knowledge records the result.

If the deceased's heart weighs the same as the feather then it is judged that they lived a just and moral life and they will continue on their journey through the afterlife. However, if their heart is heavier it will be devoured by Ammit, devourer of the dead with the forelegs of a lion, hind legs of hippopotamus, and head of a crocodile. As a result they were sent to a fire-breathing serpent called The Fiery who denied them a body, casting their soul into oblivion.

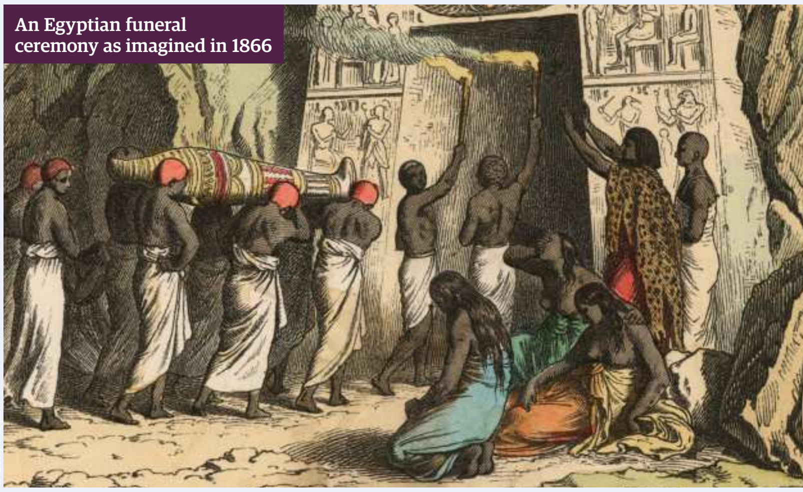
In the New Kingdom a further set of funerary texts were produced known as the Books of the Underworld, which once more provided an afterlife exclusively for the king. These included the Book of the Amduat, Book of Gates, and the Book of Caverns.

All were concerned with the 12-hour journey of the sun-god, Ra, except the Book of Caverns, which is divided into six hours. This journey

"O king, may you ascend as the morning star, may you be rowed as the lake dweller, may those who are in the abyss be afraid of you, may you give orders to the spirit"



Here an Egyptian scribe named Ani is presented to Osiris



An Egyptian funeral ceremony as imagined in 1866

mirrored the journey of the deceased from death to rebirth. All of these books have similarities in depiction showing the sun-god sailing on his solar barque from the western to eastern horizon along the underworld river, the nocturnal counterpart of the Nile. During this journey the sun is rejuvenated until he is reborn at dawn starting a new day and representing rebirth. The sun-god's progress is consistently opposed by the enemies of Ra, who are trying to prevent his rebirth. The most prolific is Apophis, depicted as a giant snake, who is continually defeated and restrained throughout the 12-hour journey.

The 12-Hour Journey

The 12-hour nocturnal journey of the sun god Ra is also by association the journey between death and rebirth of the deceased. However, the hours are represented physically rather than as an abstract concept of time and each 'hour' is separated by a gate protected by demons and serpents. The deceased soul was required to know the names of every part of the door, the demon and his weapons in order to pass and proceed to the next hour checkpoint.

The journey is both a physical and a metaphysical journey though, as throughout the 12 hours the sun-god, as a metaphor for the deceased, enters the netherworld as a ba spirit, which merges with the body of Osiris, and is reborn.

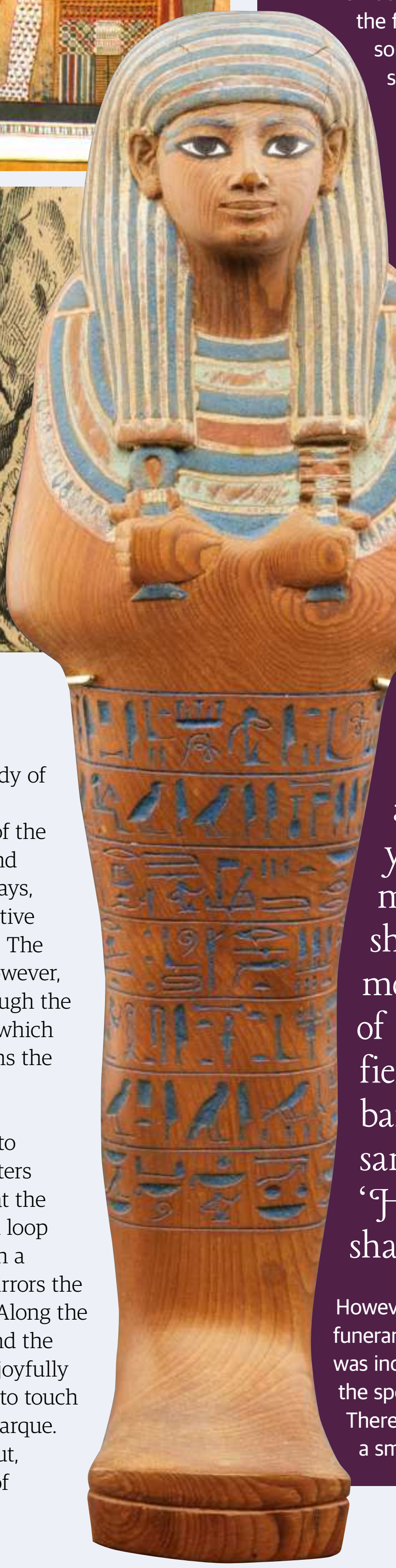
The nocturnal journey of the sun-god starts at sunset and is presented in different ways, meaning there is no definitive appearance of the afterlife. The most common imagery however, shows a river flowing through the centre of the underworld, which parallels the Nile, and forms the waterway of the sun.

To a certain extent this water could also be taken to represent the primeval waters of Nun that were present at the start of creation, creating a loop of life, death and rebirth on a metaphysical scale that mirrors the journey of the individual. Along the edge of this waterway stand the blessed dead who cry out joyfully and extended their hands to touch the tow rope of the solar barque.

However, the Book of Nut, depicted in the cenotaph of

Egyptian Magic

How incantations played an important role in death rights



The Book of Going Forth by Day was the first funerary text to specify that some chapters should be written on specific objects.

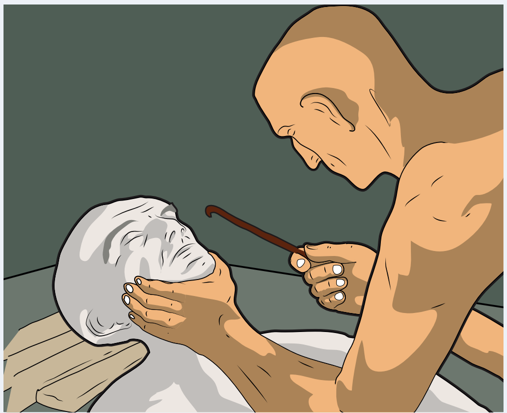
For example Spell Six was to be written on shabti (or ushabti) figures. These were small servant statues placed in the tomb who worked on behalf of the deceased should it be required. The spell reads:

> "O Shabti, allotted to me, if I be summoned or if I be detailed to do any work which has to be done in the realm of the dead: if indeed obstacles are implanted for you therewith as a man at his duties, you shall detail yourself or me on every occasion of making arable the fields, of flooding the banks, or of conveying sand from east to west; 'Here I am' you shall say."

However, as with most spells from the funerary texts, even if part of the text was included it was enough to render the spell powerful enough to do the job. Therefore most shabti figures only have a small part of Spell Six on them.

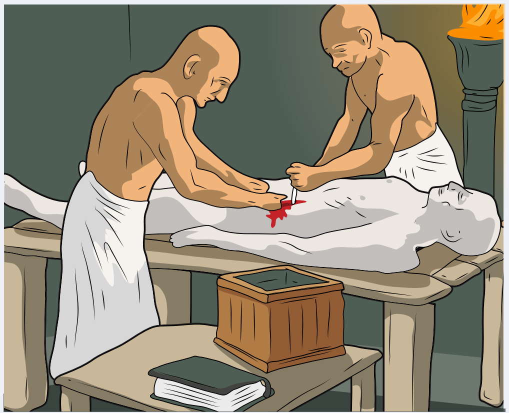
The Mummification Process

A step by step guide to how a was body managed to prepare its soul for the underworld



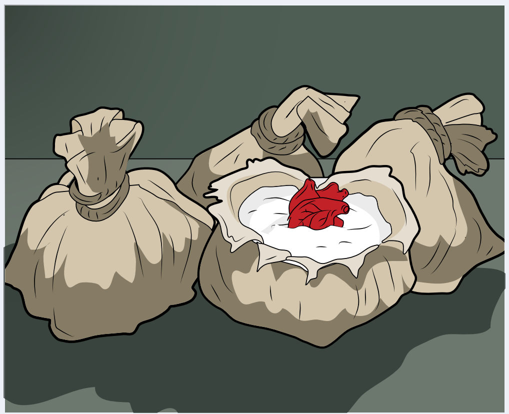
Preparing The Body

The ritual of mummifcation was largely reserved for the rich and powerful. It started with the insertion of a hook through a hole near the nose to pull out part of the brain. The brain was not considered important.



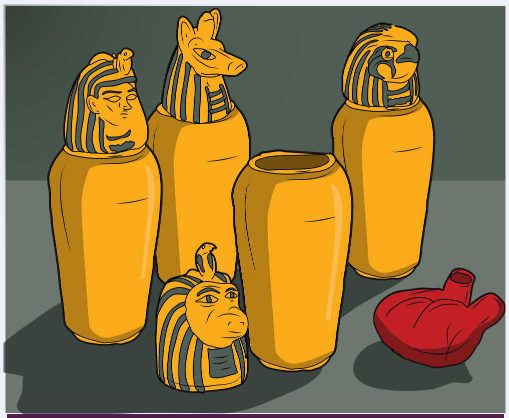
Preservation Is Key

The whole point of this process was to remove moisture to better preserve the body. A cut would be made on the left side of the body near the stomach and the process of removing all the internal organs would begin.



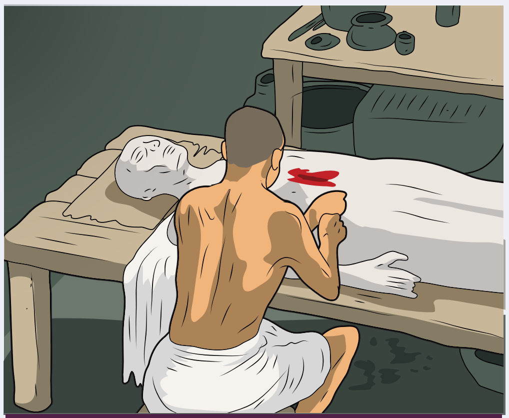
Drying Out Organs

Salt was absolutely paramount to the preservation process for a body, much as it would have been for preserving meat from animals at this time. The recently removed organs would be packed in salt to dry out.



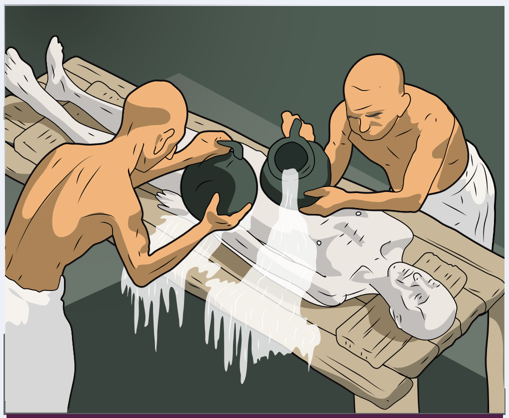
Canopic Jars

The lungs, intestines, stomach and liver would be wrapped in linens after drying and placed inside canopic jars, each with a head representing a different son of Horus, each responsible for guarding that organ.



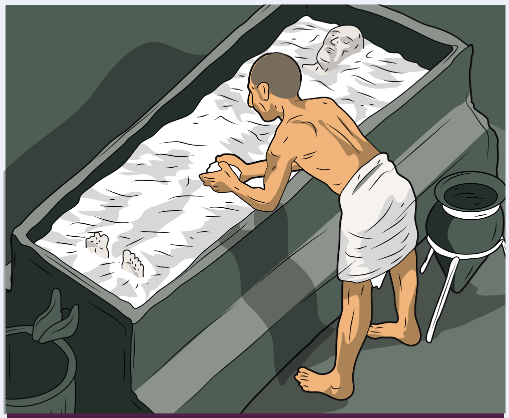
Seat Of The Soul

The key organ that would not be left outside of the body was the heart as it was considered to be the home of the human soul or spirit and therefore absolutely essential for any journey into the afterlife.



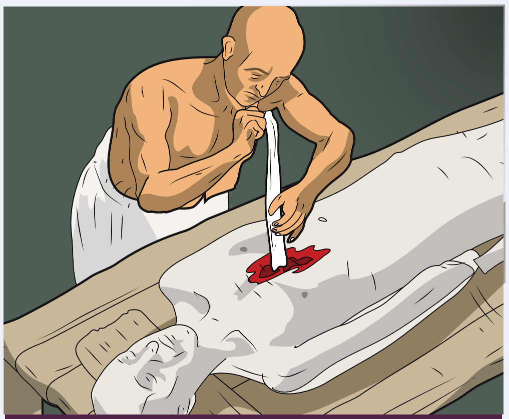
Preparing The Body

Continuing the process of removing moisture and preserving the body, the corpse would be rinsed inside and out with wine and spices in order to clean away some of the smells of decomposition.



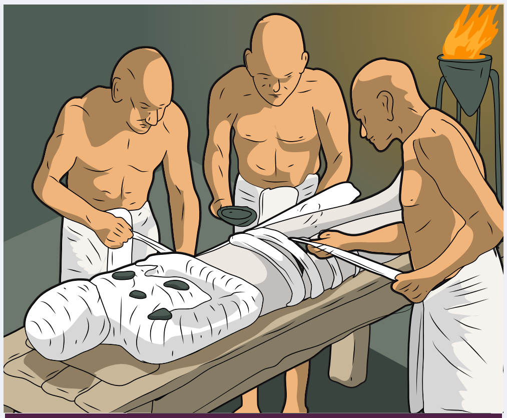
Packed In Natron Salt

The corpse would then be covered with natron (naturally occurring salt from dry lake beds) for 70 days so as to sap out any remaining moisture and further protect the body.



A Human Form

After 40 days of drying the body would be stuffed with linen or sawdust to give it a more human shape. It was thought to be important that the body be in good shape in the real world so that the soul could travel freely.



The Final Wrap

After the 70 days of drying was completed the body would then be wrapped from head to toe in bandages. Some 20 layers could be used in this process that could take up to 20 days to complete.

Seti I at Abydos and in the tomb of Ramesses IV (tomb KV2, in the Valley of the Kings), has a different image of the afterlife. It depicts the sky goddess, Nut swallowing the sun at night, representing sunset. The Sun then travels through her body on his solar barque until the sky-goddess gives birth to him again at dawn. Therefore in this representation, the body of Nut itself is the underworld and rebirth takes on a somewhat more literal form.

The king - later the deceased - is the key figure in the journey, accompanying the sun-god on the solar barque rather than being embodied by Ra. The god of the Underworld Osiris, although present, does not speak. His presence symbolises the body of the deceased.

In Egyptian religion the king is believed to become Osiris upon death. Once the funerary texts were adopted by non-royals the lines between the deceased king and deceased commoners blurred until all deceased were referred to as 'The Osiris'.

The sun-god is accompanied in his barque by the deities, Wepwawet (Opener of the Ways), Hathor (Mistress of the Barge), and Horus (Helmsman). The Book of Gates also adds Sia, the god of perception and Heka, the deity of divine magic.

In this version of the texts we are introduced to the lowest level of the Amduat; the Place of Destruction where the sun-god's power does not reach. Spell 99b from the Book of Going Forth by Day describes the place as "this terrible land where overturned stars fall on their faces and know not how to raise themselves again." Spell 175 adds that it is, "Completely deep, completely dark, completely unending." It is in this place that people whose hearts weigh more than the feather of truth in the judgment scene are punished by being decapitated, set on fire, and have their hearts torn from their bodies. This is, therefore, the ancient Egyptian concept of oblivion made far more clear and terrifying.

The pinnacle of this 12-hour journey is the rebirth of the sun-god the following morning, which is depicted as the scarab beetle being raised from the primeval waters of Nun into the sky. This not only shows the birth of a new day, the rebirth of the deceased into the afterlife but also is a recreation of the first dawn showing life is little but a perpetual cycle.

Whilst each funerary text describes the nocturnal journey of the sun-god, there are differences regarding what takes place.

This is a sample of the 12-hour journey according to the Book of the Amduat:

Hour one is just after sunset and the sun-god boards his barque to start the journey. Geographically this part of the Underworld is closest to the real world as the sun sets and disappears from the view of the living.

Hours two and three represent the entrance to the Underworld proper. It is presented as a realm of abundance dominated by water rather similar to the landscape of Egypt itself. These were known as the Waters of Osiris.

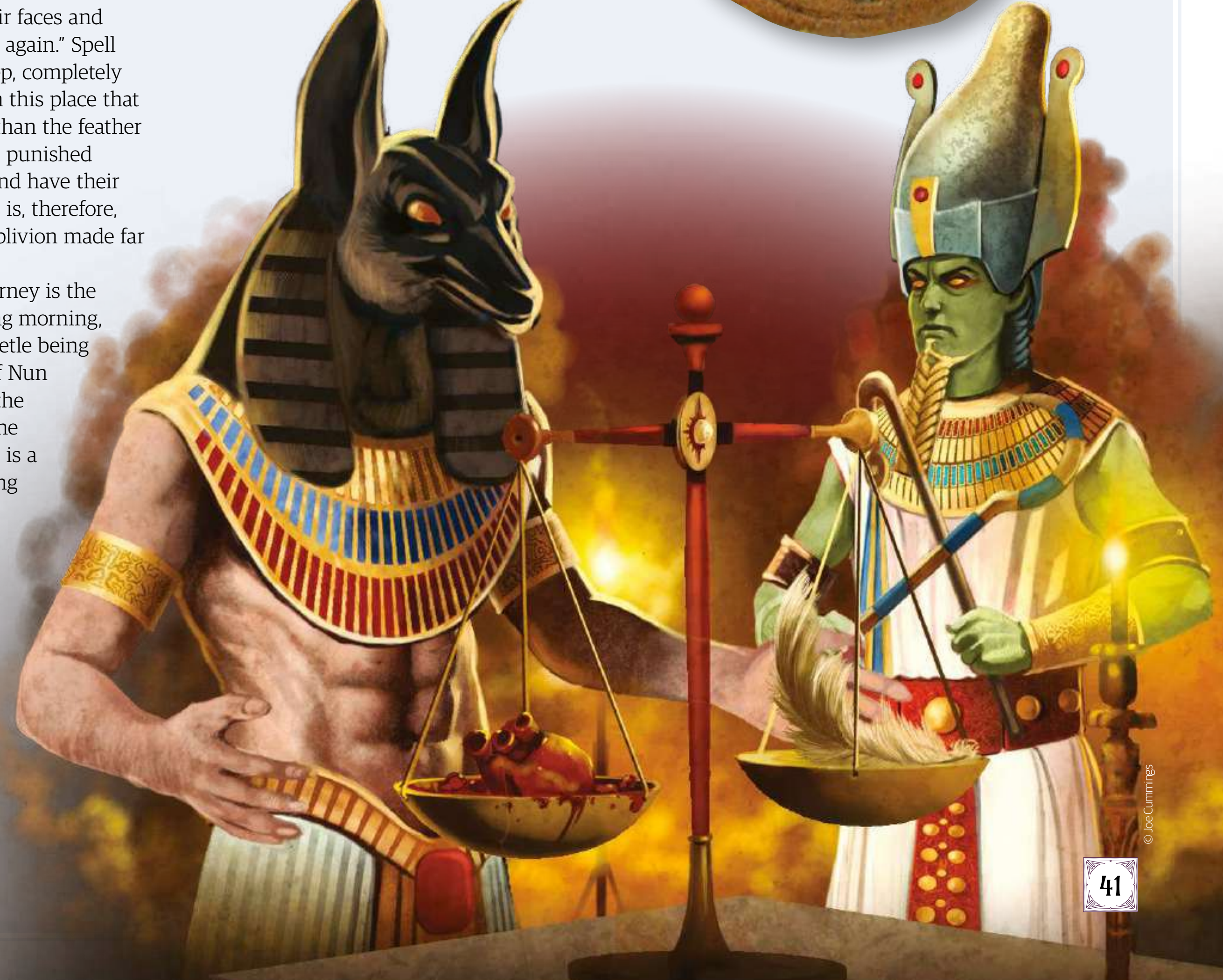
Hour four presents a contrasting landscape known as 'Desert of Rosetau' and 'Land of Sokar, who is in his sand'. Sokar was a falcon god of the dead. These lands are said to feature a zigzag of pathways that need to be navigated.

Hour five is where the sun-god finds the burial mound of Osiris. The goddesses Isis and Nephthys, as kites, mourn him. In the Book of Gates the Hall of Judgement of Osiris can be found in this hour and the tomb itself sits atop a lake of fire.

Hour six is halfway through the night and is when the ba of the sun-god unites with the corpse of Osiris representing the unification of the

> "The pinnacle of this 12-hour journey is the rebirth of the sun-god the following morning"

Heart scarabs would be placed on the deceased to signal their virtues for Anubis



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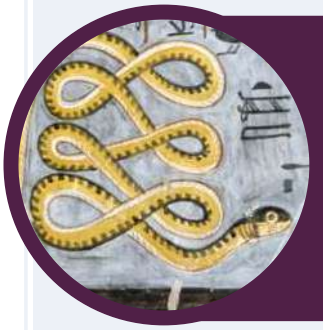
Monsters Of The Underworld

Just some of the recurring guardians who block the path of the dead to the afterlife



Apophis

The enemy of the sun-god Ra, Apophis is depicted in various hours of the Underworld journey trying to intercept the sun-god. He was a giant snake and is generally shown being overcome by supporters of Ra. These include the god of chaos, Seth, the Eye of Ra, and even the sun-god in the form of the Great Cat. They attack Apophis enabling the sun-god and therefore the deceased to continue the journey to rebirth. Apophis is not known prior to the Middle Kingdom and gains in popularity throughout the New Kingdom.

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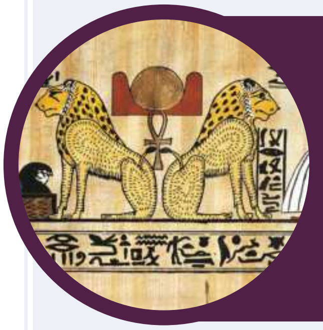
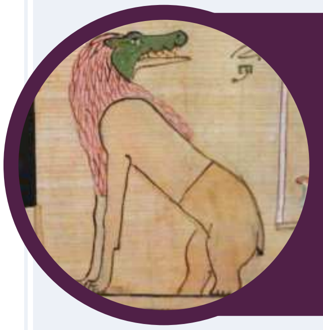


Aker

This two-headed lion has one head facing forward and one facing to the rear. He is therefore often given the title of 'He who is looking forward and behind.' He was sometimes depicted as two lions – named Duaj (meaning 'yesterday') and Sefer (meaning 'tomorrow') – sitting back to back with the hieroglyphic sign for horizon between them. Aker protected the deceased king against three demonic snakes: Hemtet, Iqeru and Jagw, by 'encircling' the deceased king – a metaphor for burying him.



Ammit

One well-depicted anti-animal, representative of the chaos of the underworld is Ammit, also known as the 'Devourer of the Dead' or 'Eater of Hearts'. She was a demon depicted with the hind quarters of a hippopotamus, front quarters of a lion and the head of a crocodile. She is depicted seated beneath the scales in the Hall of Judgement of Osiris. Any heart which was heavier than the feather would be devoured by Ammit condemning the deceased to oblivion.

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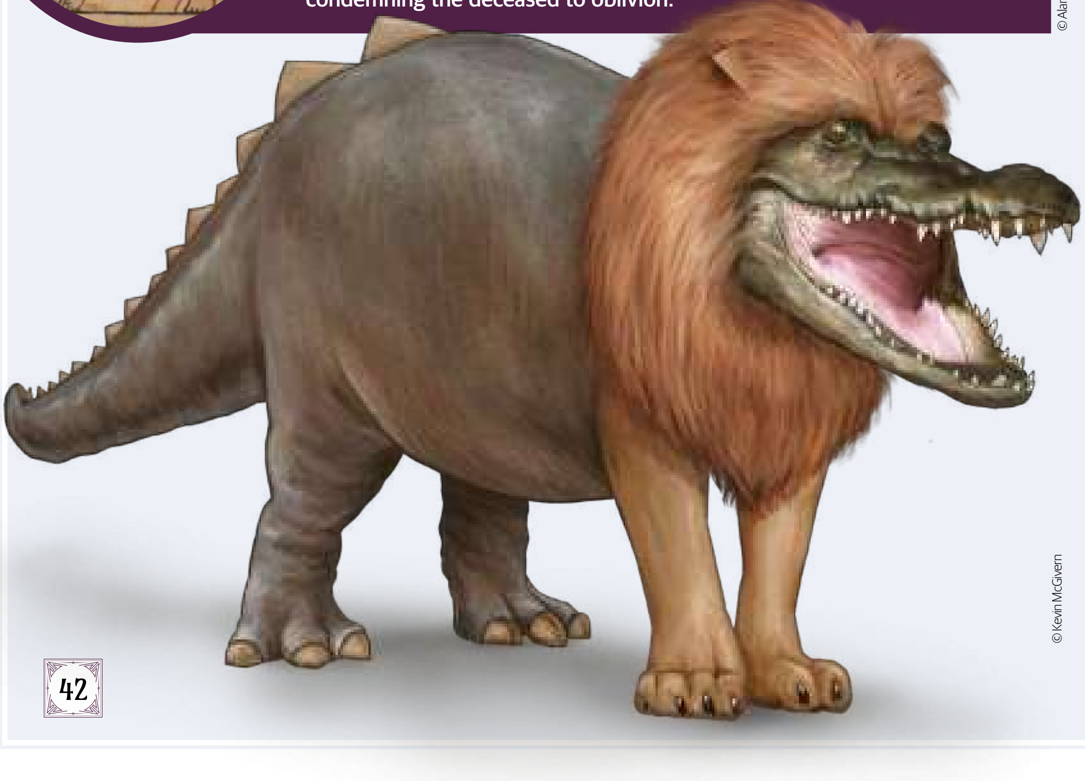


© Kevin McGivern

deceased with the spirit. This also marks the point at which the sun-god begins to regenerate and build towards his rebirth at dawn.

Hours seven and eight represent the midnight hour with a theme of the sun-god overcoming his enemies. While still gathering strength he must defeat the likes of Apophis with magic. Only once this is done can the he escape the desert island of Sokar.

Hour nine depicts a procession with the solar barque travelling through the hour with his entourage closing in on the dawn.

Hour ten shows the primordial water of Nun from which all creation began. In this murky water, the helpless bodies of those unfortunates who drowned in the Nile and deprived a proper burial are depicted.

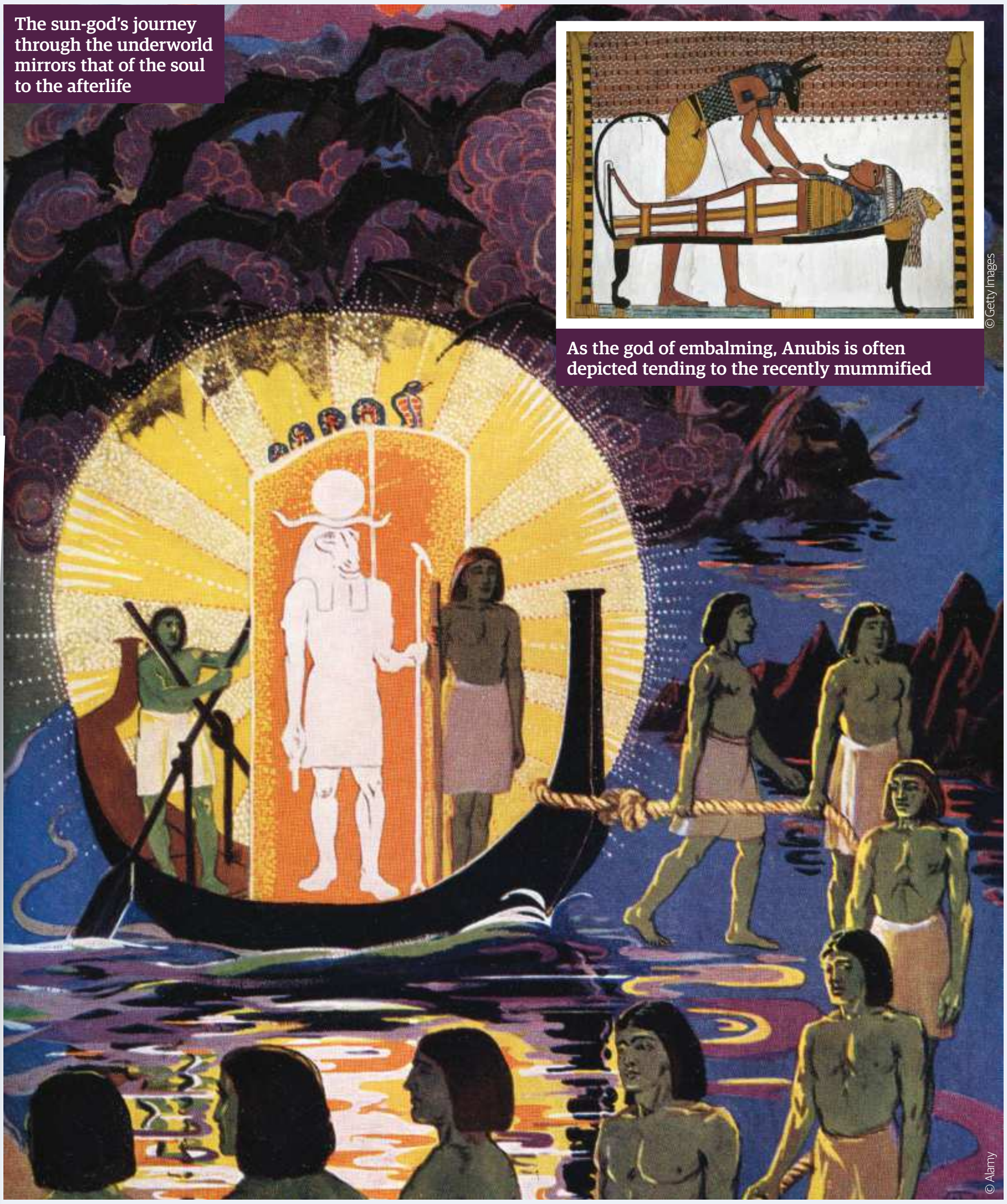
> "The role of Aker, the two-headed lion was to protect the deceased king against three demonic snakes"

Hour 11 is filled with preparation for the coming sun-rise in the eastern mountains and the rebirth of the sun-god and the deceased. It is said that at this point the eyes of the sun-god are regenerated to show his power returning. A serpent known as the 'World Encircler' surrounds the Sun protecting him at this time of rebirth.

Hour 12 is the final hour of the journey and the one in which the sun-god re-emerges on the eastern horizon as a scarab beetle announcing a new day, as well as the successful resurrection of the deceased.

Such was how the Egyptian relationship with death was depicted and evolved with time. As

A mummy from the National Archaeology Museum, Madrid funeral rights became more commonplace, so they also became more elaborate and in some ways more colourful for those in power. Life and death were a part of a journey and a way in which ancient Egyptians related their existence with that of the world around them and the gods. Looking at their religious texts and the stories they tell gives us an amazing insight into their beliefs and ways of thinking. It was often dark and gruesome, but in some ways that was a reflection of the dark brutality of the reality before them.



The sun-god's journey through the underworld mirrors that of the soul to the afterlife

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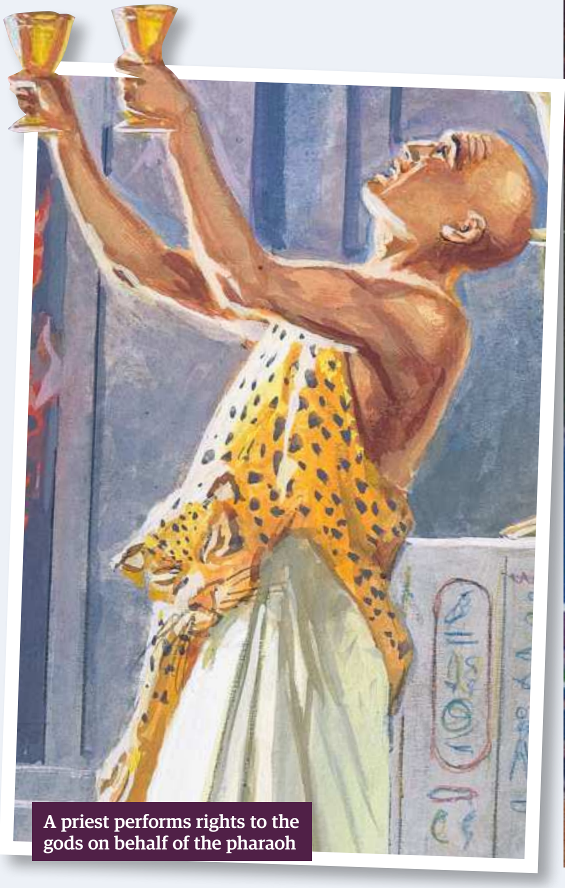
As the god of embalming, Anubis is often depicted tending to the recently mummified



A priest performs rights to the gods on behalf of the pharaoh

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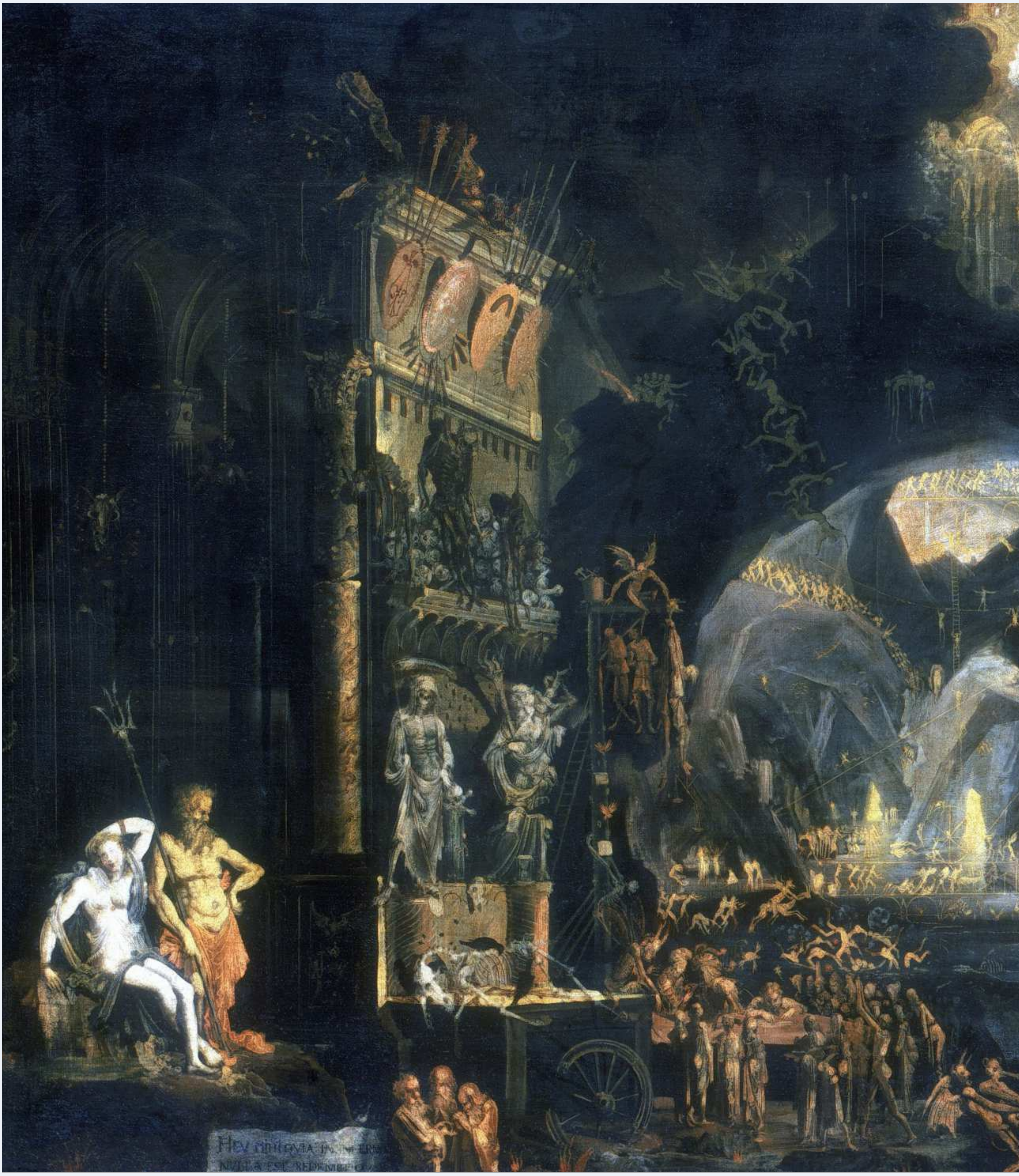
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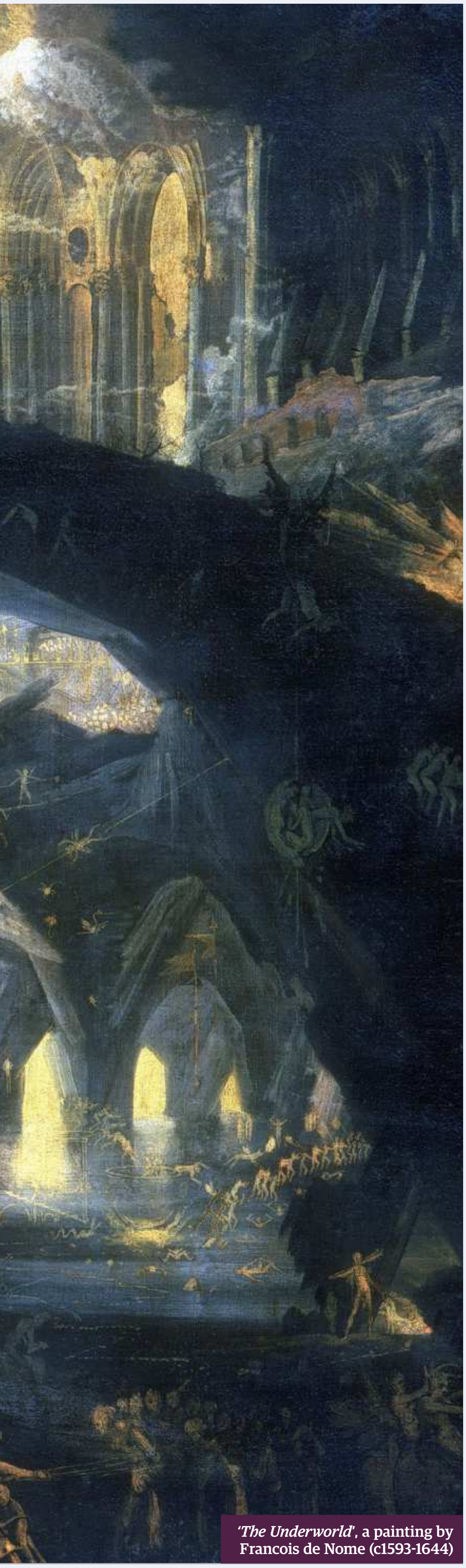

'The Underworld', a painting by Francois de Nome (c1593-1644)

The Ancient Greek Underworld

The ghosts of the dead are imprisoned for eternity in a dark, sunless realm full of monstrous supernatural beings, where nothing will ever change

Written by Paul Fishman

According to a popular story, the brothers Zeus, Poseidon and Hades divided up the cosmos between them by casting lots. Hades received the Underworld - henceforth the House of Hades - and it was sometimes said that he wasn't happy with his luck. Just what had he won?

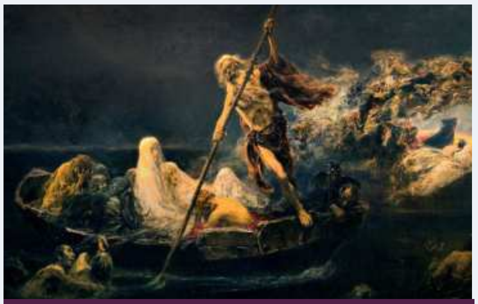
If Olympus was like life, but more so, with everything being more vivid, food and drink tasting better, music sounding better, and so on, and the gods being stronger, more beautiful, wiser and happier than mortals - with no death and no real cares - then the Underworld was very much the opposite.

For mortals, in the Underworld there was only death and, inasmuch as they felt anything, sorrow. In the oldest Greek view of the House of Hades, with few exceptions the dead carried on more or less as they had done in life, but in a bloodless, joyless, mechanical way, without colour or feeling, and without any real connection to or communication with the other ghosts around them. They had no strength, intelligence or vigour, and were prone to forgetfulness. They didn't change at all from the moment of death - even down to those who had died violently still bearing their bloody wounds - and nothing they did was meaningful. They lived in perpetual darkness.

There were very few heroes who were said to enjoy something better, and there were very few transgressors against the gods themselves who were said to endure specially designed torments, but traditionally little emphasis was placed on this. The House of Hades was more a prison of sorts than a place of punishment, and it didn't seem to serve any purpose except for cutting the dead off from the world of the living. There they stayed, sometimes said to know what was happening above them and to be able to advise the living, sometimes said to be ignorant, and usually thought to be unable to do much of anything at all.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the heroes summon the dead on the threshold of the Underworld by offering a sacrifice of sheep's blood, milk, honey and wine, and ghosts flock around them making strange, speechless noises, thirsty to drink the blood that can restore them briefly to full consciousness and give them the ability to speak to the living. Without drinking, even the ghost of Odysseus' own mother can't recognise him. The shade of Achilles, the greatest hero of the Trojan War, the man who in the *Iliad* decided it was better to live a short, glorious life than a long and obscure one, tells Odysseus that he would rather be another man's serf working a plough and alive, than be a king among the dead. Such was the shadow life in the House of Hades, where even the most menial servitude of the living in the world above was preferable.

It's a strangely bleak view of death, almost worse than being judged and then punished. It's also shocking that great Achilles was not one of the heroes to be granted a place among the blessed. If not him, then who? Homer wasn't the only authority on the Underworld, and there are other stories in which Achilles had a happier time of things in the House of Hades, while ideas about the fate of the dead came to be more complex with time, but this sombre traditional picture of dreary eternity continued to be a fundamental part of the Greek view of death. Perhaps it is part of why they valued life so highly, and strove to make so much of it.



Charon the Boatman ferrying the dead across either the Styx or the Acheron, depending on who you choose to believe

Rivers Of The Underworld

Far from a place infested by fire, waterways were plentiful in Hades

Rivers were an important feature of the Underworld. There were six of them, each highly symbolic. Some also served a practical function.

Styx ('abomination') served as a barrier, keeping the dead both inside and outside the House of Hades, as required. When you crossed it, you were crossing over to the land of the dead. In some versions, it flowed into an Underworld lake. Some writers placed it in the Chelmos mountain range in northern Arcadia. Oaths sworn using its waters were sacred.

The waters of Lethe ('oblivion') made the dead forget their past existence when drunk. However, in the Underworld scene in the *Odyssey*, the dead retain their memories.

In some sources, the dead are ferried across Acheron ('pain' or 'groaning'), as well as or instead of Styx. It has a real-world source in northwest Greece, flowing from the Thresprotian mountains to the sea, having joined the Cocytus.

Cocytus ('lamentation') and Phlegethon ('flaming', also known as Pyriphlegethon, 'blazing with fire') flow into Acheron in the myths.

Odysseus beached his ship on the shore of Oceana, the world-encircling river, when he travelled to speak to the dead. It sits at the eastern edge of the Underworld.

Sisyphus was a cunning adversary of the gods when alive, but paid for his tricks and impiety in the afterlife

The dead weren't the only inhabitants of the Underworld, of course. There were many supernatural residents, few of whom you'd want to meet. Plus, in addition to the gods and goddesses, the defeated Titans - the pre-Olympian gods - were imprisoned by Zeus below in deep Tartarus, along with the human 'special prisoners'.

Many of the divinities of the Underworld were obvious personifications of abstract ideas and emotions, and some of the place names, especially the rivers, followed suit. It's not hard to work out what the goddess Nyx (night) and the River Lethe ('forgetfulness') are about. However, the Greeks didn't envisage the Underworld as a vague abstraction; to them, it was a real and definite physical place - possibly located somewhere in the west, where the sun set into darkness every night - that could be roughly mapped.

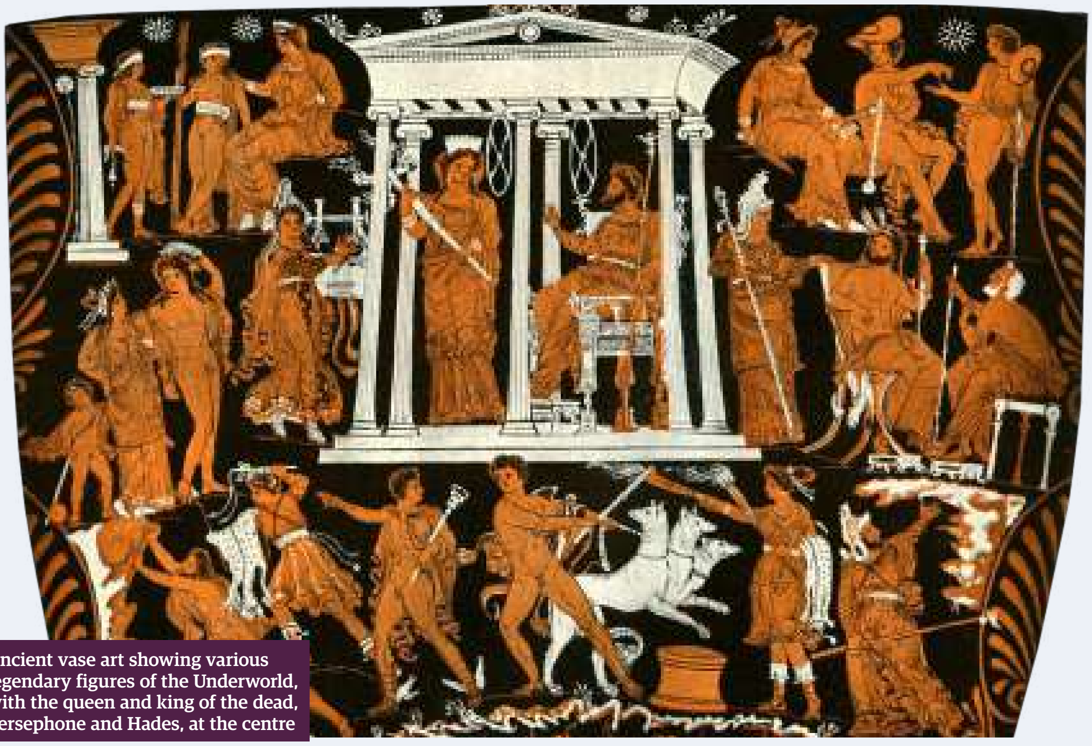
There was no single authoritative account of the Underworld. As with the other myths, there was a mass of incomplete and sometimes contradictory stories. Nevertheless, a broad outline was widely accepted, at least in terms of traditional beliefs; philosophers, mystics and other speculators sometimes had their own ideas.

Mapping The Underworld

In the Odyssey, the travellers sail to the edge of the world to find the entrance to the House of Hades. They find a dark, foggy land of poplars and willows where two of the rivers of the Underworld - Phlegethon (or Pyriphlegethon) and Cocytus ('lamentation') - flow into a third, Acheron. The sources disagree as to where exactly this is, but some real rivers are identified with these mythical ones. The real Acheron, for example, is in northwestern Greece, where its most striking feature is the gorge that it flows through upstream, which may account for its connection with the descent to the Underworld. Rivers are conspicuous in the Underworld.

New guests of Hades (who was sometimes known as Polydegmon, 'the hospitable') are delivered to the near bank of the river Styx - or Acheron, depending on who you listen to. Here they must pay Charon to take them across in his boat to the House of Hades. His fee is an obol, and Greeks would be buried with a coin under their tongues unless they had no one to pay their fare. Those without money would be left to wander forever on the river bank, unless they could evade their hosts and sneak in through a back entrance. Similarly, Charon refuses to embark those who have not been buried. Leaving the dead unburied was sacrilegious, and indeed Odysseus was rebuked by the ghost of an unburied comrade when he spoke to the summoned dead outside the Underworld.

Various gods, goddesses and mythical creatures were sometimes said to inhabit the entrance to the Underworld, while it was also said to contain an elm bearing false dreams. But on the far bank of Styx (or Acheron) lived a beast, the multi-headed watchdog Cerberus. In most accounts he had three heads, but the poet Hesiod claimed he had 50. His tail was a snake while serpent heads grew from his back, and he was welcoming to the newly dead, but hostile towards trespassers and especially living mortals. His foul saliva was said to have created the poison aconite when it dribbled to the earth, and his appearance was so repellant that looking on him could turn men to stone. He was ferocious but not invincible, having been bested by Heracles. However, Orpheus managed to charm him with music to gain entry to the Underworld.



Ancient vase art showing various legendary figures of the Underworld, with the queen and king of the dead, Persephone and Hades, at the centre

In many accounts, those who made it into the House of Hades would then come to the seated figures of Minos, Rhadamanthus and Aeacus. The first two were ancient kings of Crete, famed for their laws and wisdom. Aeacus had been renowned for being just when alive. These three, all mortal sons of Zeus, were said to be the judges of the Underworld, though their real roles and importance weren't entirely clear. It was sometimes said that Rhadamanthus resolved disputes between the dead, rather than judging them.

Only the very wicked and the outstandingly meritorious were given special treatment by the judges; most of the dead were viewed as being more or less neutral. At least in the older stories, the emphasis was on the relationship of the dead person with the gods; only those who had specifically offended against them were wicked enough to be sent for everlasting punishment, and only those who were well connected, such as heroes with a divine parent, were good enough to be sent somewhere favourable. It also seemed rather arbitrary, with some heroes doing rather better than others for no apparent reason.

Most of the dead would then be sent to the Plain of Asphodel. Descriptions of this place varied, but it mainly seemed to be bland and and featureless, despite its promising name. Those who were to be punished would either remain in Hades or be sent to Tartarus, while those who were being rewarded might journey to Elysium or the Isles of the Blessed, although the latter two may have actually been the same place.

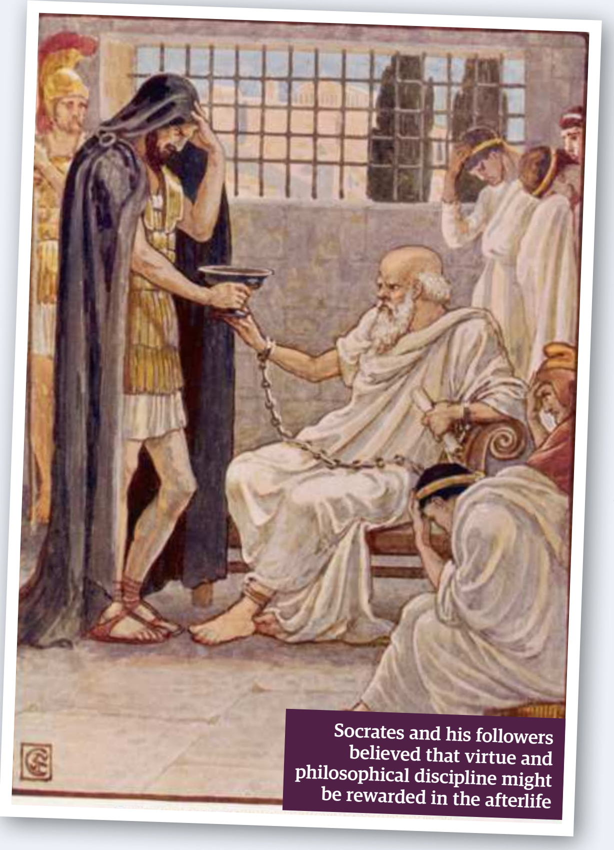
Tartarus was not exactly in the Underworld, at least in some versions; in Homer's *Iliad* it was said by Zeus to be in the deepest abyss, as far below the House of Hades as the sky is above the Earth. Originally it was the prison for the Titans, as much for safekeeping as or punishment, but then it was also used to house those humans who had particularly offended the gods.

Those mortals chosen for special punishment included Tantalus, from whose name we have the word 'tantalise' because of the nature of his punishment. He seemed pretty determined to invite the wrath of the gods, with various outstanding crimes being attributed to him. Most notoriously, he tried to test the gods' omniscience by inviting them to a banquet and serving them the flesh of his murdered son, Pelops, in a stew All the gods realised, except Demeter, who was distracted by the absence of her kidnapped daughter, Persephone, and ate some of the shoulder.

Tantalus was also accused of stealing ambrosia and nectar, the food and drink of the gods; of telling tales about what he had heard the gods say; and of lying to them. For this he was punished by being kept everlastingly hungry and thirsty as he stood in water up to his chin with fruit hanging above him, just out of his reach - in other words, he was being tantalised.

Sisyphus also committed multiple crimes, such as murdering guests, which was a major sacrilege. Hosts had a religious duty towards guests, who were under the protection of the gods. Worst of all, he informed on Zeus for one of his affairs. He then tricked both Thanatos and Hades, and cheated death for a time. As punishment, he was sentenced to push a boulder up a hill for eternity, with the stone always rolling down

A funerary lekythos (flask) showing Charon receiving an eidolon, the wispy, insect-like soul of a newly dead person



Socrates and his followers believed that virtue and philosophical discipline might be rewarded in the afterlife

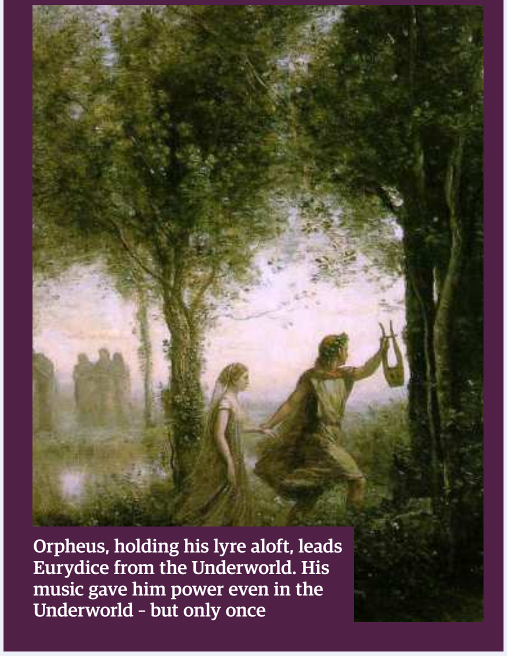
Orpheus & Eurydice

The man whose playing of the lyre literally rose hell

Orpheus was the greatest poet and musician of the ancient world, by reputation, a son of the muse Calliope, and either a son or an associate of Apollo. It was said that his music would entrance wild beasts, and that even trees and stones would come to him to listen. Fanciful as this may be, it's possible that his legend was based on a historical figure and that he was the real founder of the mystic cult of Orphism.

Orpheus was married to Eurydice, possibly a naiad or dryad. When she was bitten fatally by a snake while trying to escape a violent assault, Orpheus resolved to bring her back from the Underworld. His music charmed everyone from Charon and Cerberus through to the three judges of the Underworld, and Hades and Persephone; even the listless dead were mesmerised.

Orpheus was given permission to take Eurydice on the condition that he didn't look at her walking behind him until they were clear of the Underworld, a condition that he obeyed until he reached sunlight and turned to see her become a ghostly mist, and vanish back to the House of Hades, never to walk on earth again. That's the best known version of the story, but in the oldest the couple were successfully reunited; a happier but less memorable ending.



Orpheus, holding his lyre aloft, leads Eurydice from the Underworld. His music gave him power even in the Underworld - but only once

> "Gods, goddesses and mythical creatures were said to inhabit the entrance to the Underworld, while it was also said to contain an elm bearing false dreams"

The Bright Side Of Death

Not all Greek plays were tragedies – some made fun of fearsome Hades

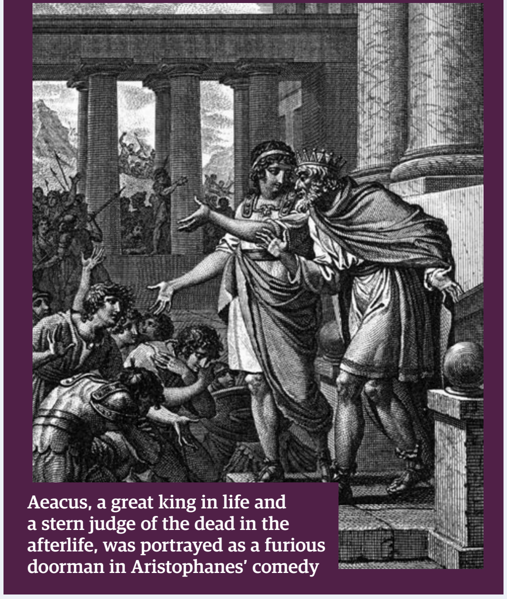
For all the fear and bleakness of their Underworld, the Greeks were occasionally capable of laughing at their solemn and terrible deities – and at the House of Hades itself.

In Aristophanes' comedy *The Frogs* (405 BCE), the god Dionysus travels to the Underworld to fetch back a dead Athenian playwright – he hasn't yet decided which one. He dresses as a sort of pantomime version of the fearsome Hercules, who has previously been to the House of Hades and back, to gain admission.

Famous figures from the Underworld such as Charon and a very bad-tempered Aeacus mingle with innkeepers and amorous chambermaids, and aren't treated with a great deal of reverence. Dionysius himself is a classic cowardly hero, while Aeacus is a classic blustering comedy opponent.

It's hard to gauge just how shocking contemporary Greeks would have found this blasphemy, but it undoubtedly added considerable edge to the laughter.

For all the slapstick humour, Aristophanes portrays the Underworld accurately according to traditional views, while Dionysius also encounters a chorus of Eleusinian initiates.



Aeacus, a great king in life and a stern judge of the dead in the afterlife, was portrayed as a furious doorman in Aristophanes' comedy

> "The House of Hades was a vast prison in which almost everyone had received the same sentence"

just before it reached the top. This is the origin of the word 'Sisyphean', meaning a task that is endless and utterly futile.

As can be seen, the worst crime was to defy or insult the gods, and it was the impious who received special punishments. Judgment was more religious than explicitly moral in a modern sense, and it usually fitted neatly into a story.

Similarly, the way to find yourself in Elysium or the Isles of the Blessed was to be beloved of the gods. Having Zeus as your father did no harm at all, and being the hero of some famous stories also helped. As with Tartarus, neither of these places was usually thought to be within the Underworld or under the jurisdiction of Hades; the Isles of the Blessed were said to be ruled by Cronos, father of Zeus and other Olympian gods, while in the *Odyssey* Elysium was said to be ruled by Rhadamanthus. Their delights were quite unimaginatively physical with nice weather, good food, no work – basically the ideal holiday venue.

It can be argued that it is wrong to view the three judges of the Underworld as part of a regular process, which would be experienced by all. Perhaps they are best seen as parts of the plots of individual myths, like King Arthur being rowed to Avalon when he is dying – one-offs that fit with those stories, and not as something that might happen in the same way each time someone died. They're a way to neatly bring a story to a close.

This is not to say that the Greeks had no interest in justice, punishment and reward in the afterlife, or didn't think about them. From perhaps the 6th century BCE on, it became a subject of increasing interest, but it seemed to be exceptional rather than standard in the traditional stories and beliefs, and not very well developed.

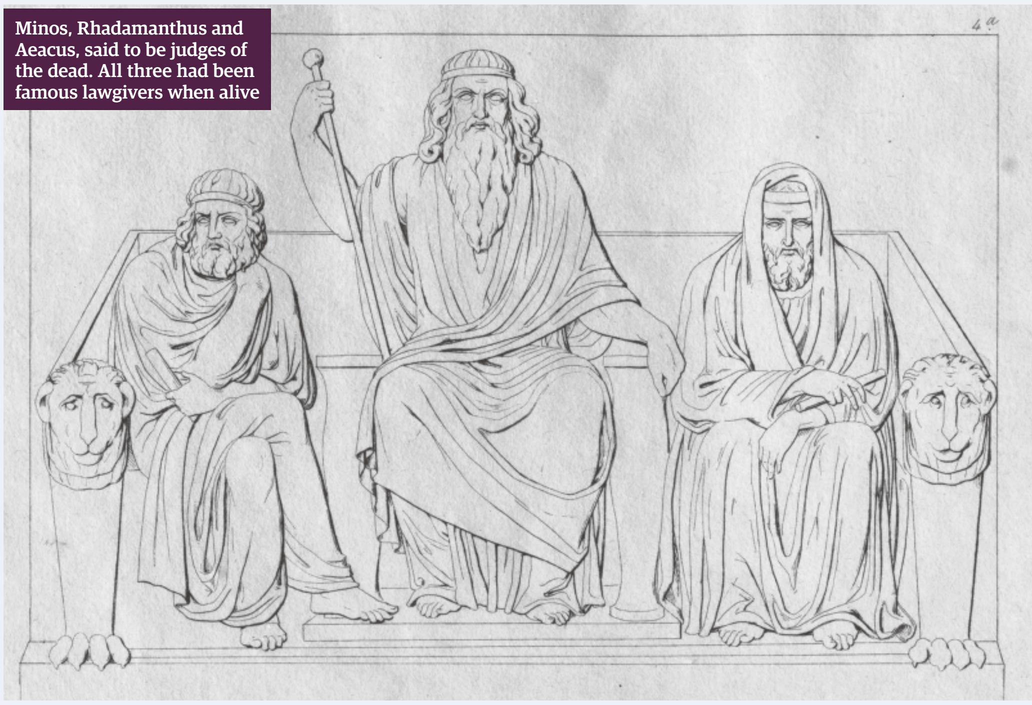
In the meantime, the House of Hades was a vast prison in which almost everyone had received the same sentence for the non-crime of dying. This is why the House of Hades was often represented as having many gates, locks and keys; after all, even Persephone, queen of the dead, was a prisoner of sorts, despite living in the most salubrious quarter of the Underworld, in Hades' sombre but magnificent palace.

More Complexity And Greater Justice

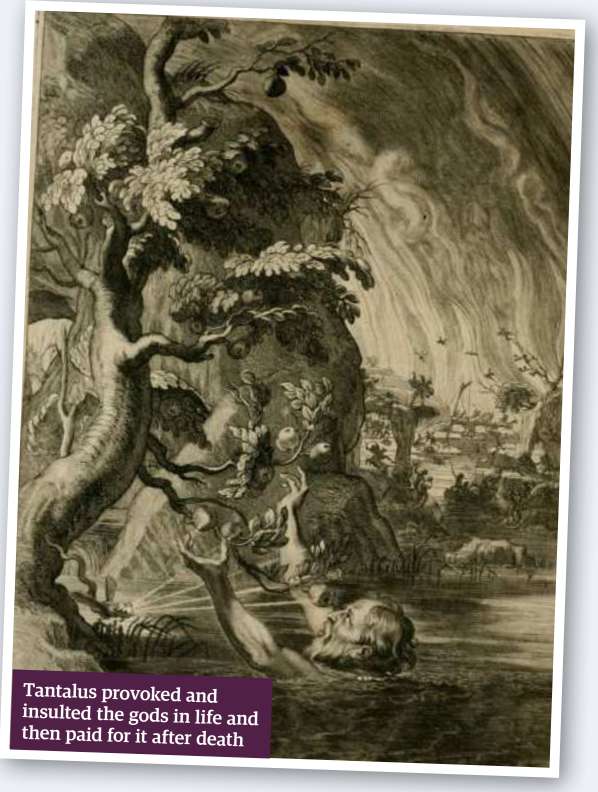
The old view of the afterlife as being impersonal and undifferentiated came under pressure from various religious movements, such as the Orphic and Dionysian cults, and the Eleusinian Mysteries. Philosophers like Plato would also begin to add a moral dimension, as well as scrutinise messy traditional beliefs.

Although philosophers might describe a more abstract vision of the Underworld, some of the religious cults became even more specific about its physical reality. Initiates would be given instructions on what to do and where to go on arrival. Don't drink the waters of forgetfulness; take a right turn here; say these words, and so on. Texts have been found that seemed to serve not just as travel guides for the Underworld, but as passports for special treatment – priority boarding passes, if you like. Cult members would presumably be buried with them, so they'd be to hand on arrival.

The Eleusinian Mysteries centred on a cult of Demeter and Persephone, and was based at Eleusis, not far from Athens. It was an ancient and very secretive cult, and promised members a joyful afterlife as an alternative to the dreary House of Hades. Similarly, the Orphic cult, probably based on the musician Orpheus, and the Dionysian cult, based on the ecstatic god of wine and theatre, promised a much happier afterlife for members.



Minos, Rhadamanthus and Aeacus, said to be judges of the dead. All three had been famous lawgivers when alive

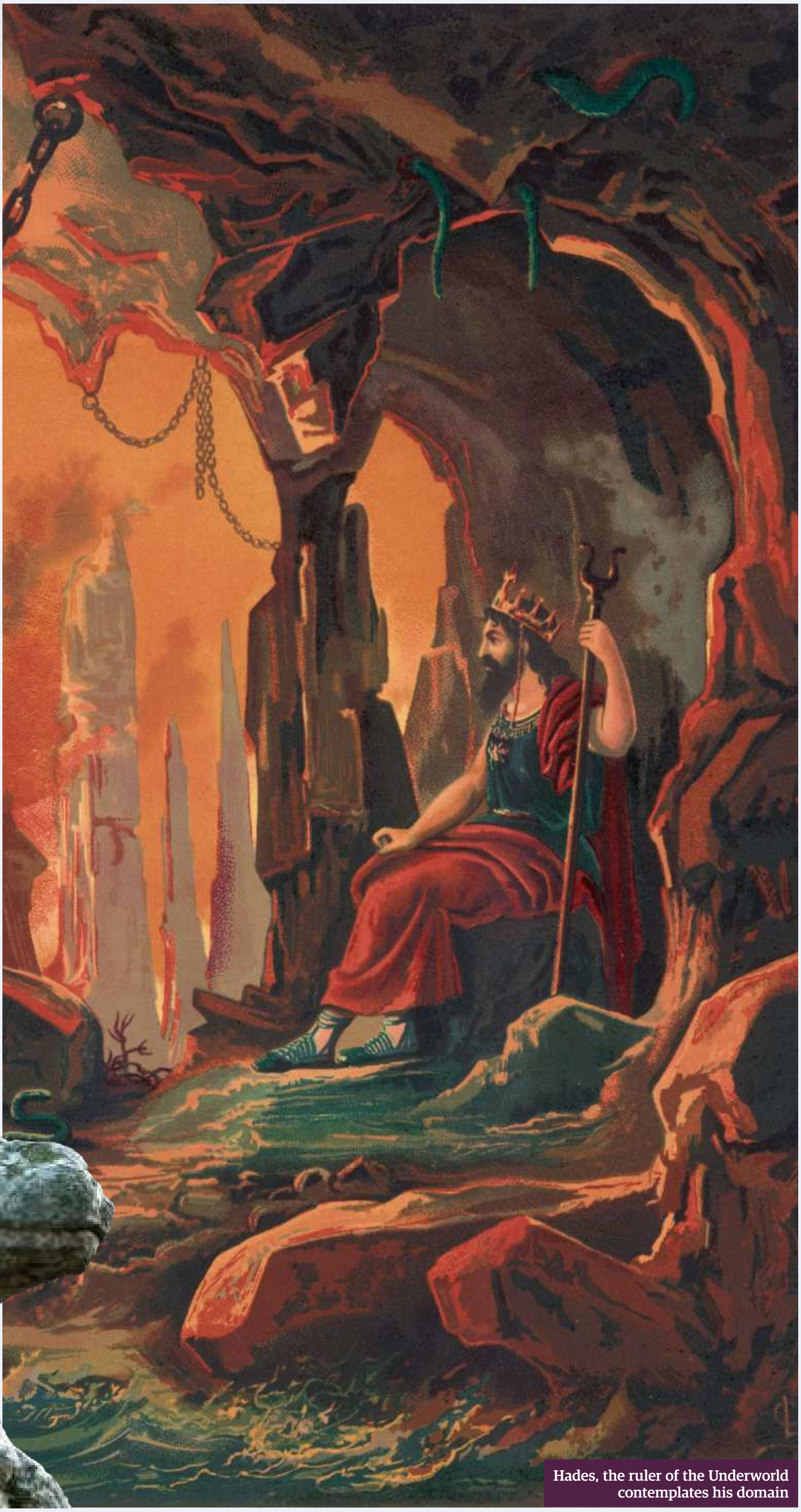


Tantalus provoked and insulted the gods in life and then paid for it after death

What all of these movements shared was a view of the Underworld that was more complex than the traditional one. There were more possibilities for what might happen to you after death; more places to go. Virtue might be rewarded and bad deeds punished. You could affect your afterlife, and not just win the lottery through being related to Zeus. Having been a faithful cult member was also useful, of course, if you wanted to be rewarded.

Meanwhile, in *Phaedo*, his account of the last days of his teacher Socrates, Plato developed a more philosophical version of the same theme. Plato's version says that those who have made progress in trying to live virtuously and have purified themselves through philosophy might be released from imprisonment within the earth when dead and then live without bodies in places that are both wonderful and difficult to describe. It's worth noting that Plato's Socrates still talks about the traditional landmarks of the Underworld, as the old tradition lived on. It was just being transformed.

Did Cerberus, the fearsome watchdog of the Underworld, have three heads, or 50?



Hades, the ruler of the Underworld contemplates his domain

© Alamy, Getty Images, Carole Raddato

Celts: Cult of Death

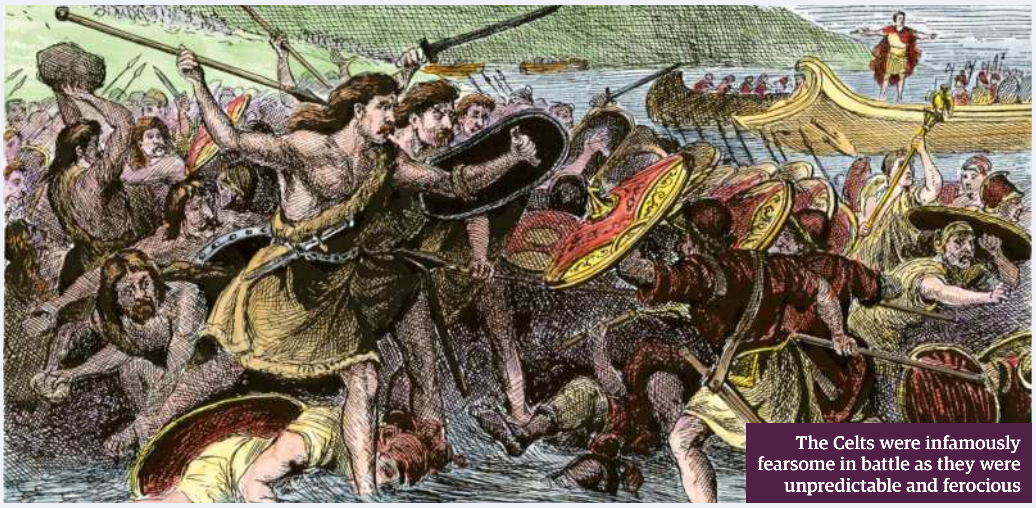
From human sacrifice to headhunting, the Celts had a ferocious reputation in the ancient world and a vivid vision of the afterlife

Written by Jack Griffiths

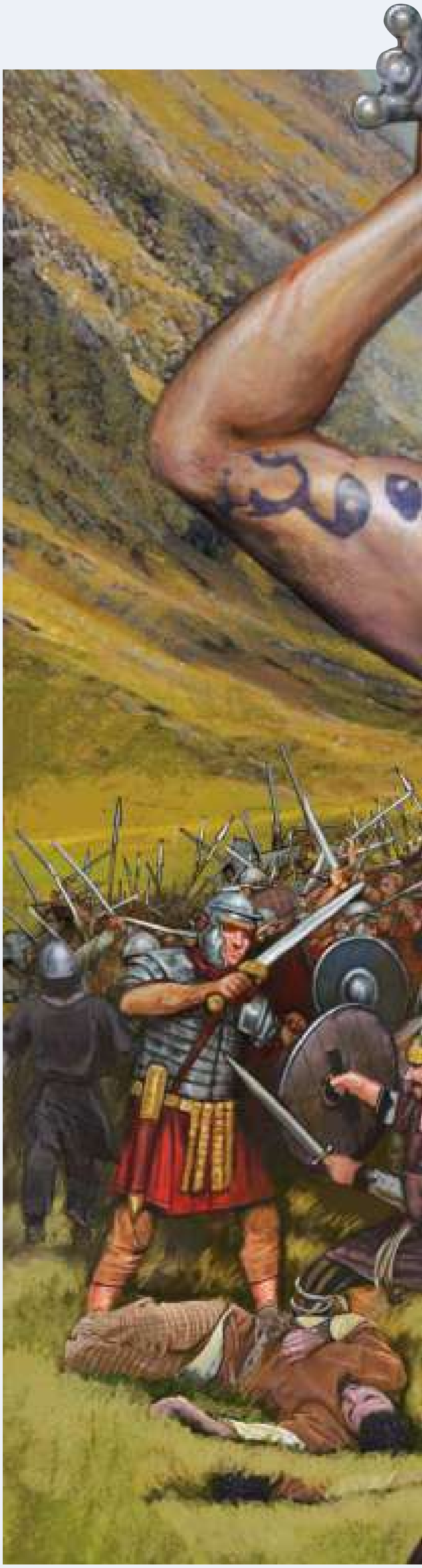
Prior to the coming of the Romans, the Hallstatt and La Tène cultures flourished in a continental Celtic civilisation that had its heartland in central Europe but branched out as far east as Asia Minor and as far west as Ireland. Although it was a fragmented society made up of clans with no centralised government, one thing the Celts were unified on was the cult of death. Across Europe, this major part of Celtic culture centred on a reverence for human heads and elaborate burial sites. In Britain, Ireland and Gaul (France) especially, a class of people known as druids became the link between the natural and the supernatural. The Celts believed that for a clan to survive and truly prosper, the dead must be properly respected.

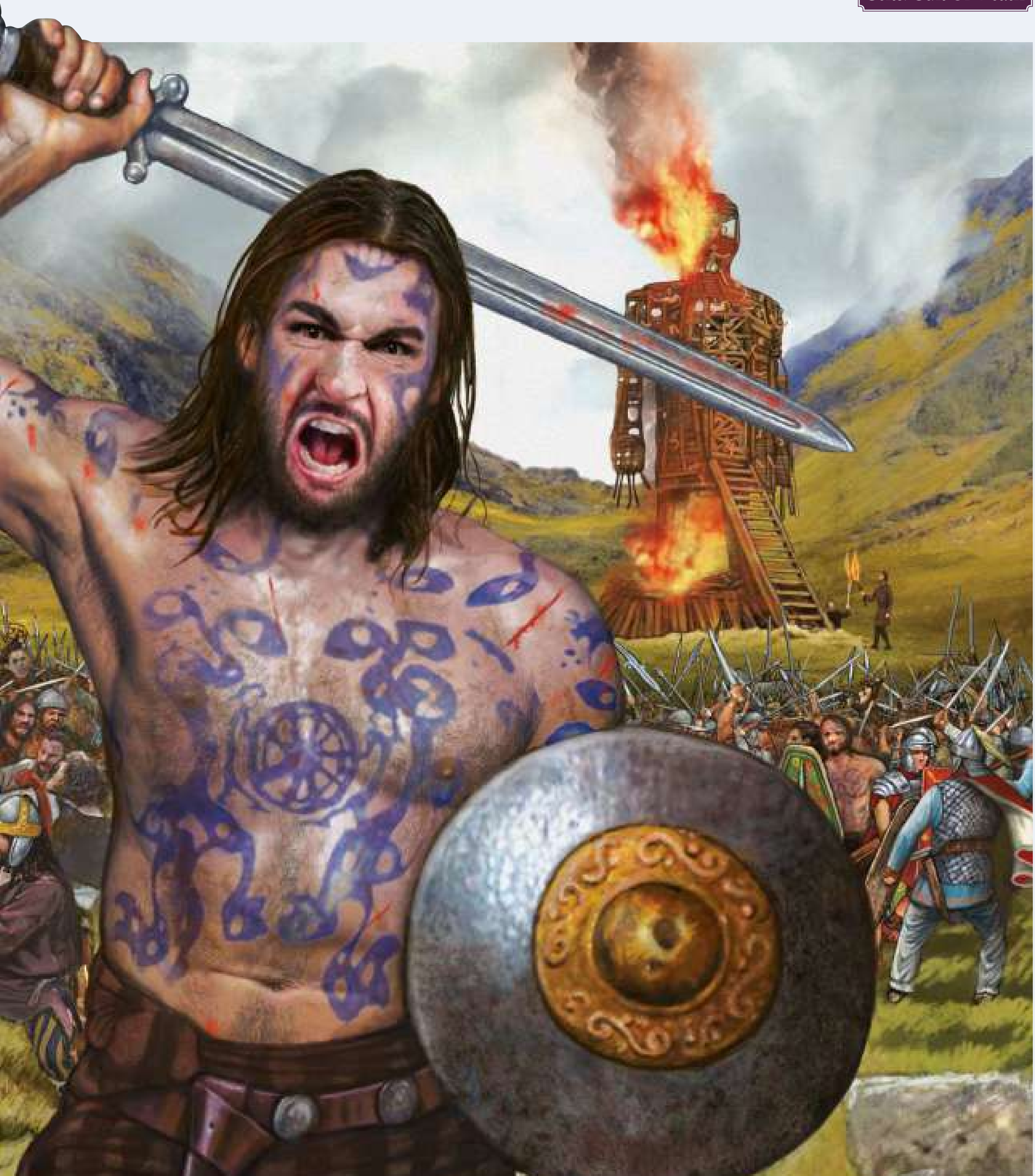
The Celtic warrior tradition was very similar to the hero culture that existed in Ancient Greece and Rome, with elite fighters admired as champions and inspirations. It was believed that the spirits of these great heroes lived on after death, with the cult of death based on the idea of a supernatural realm known as the Otherworld. The belief was that once a Celt's mortal body had died, the soul would live on. Elaborate burial sites have been found across Europe with food, weapons and supplies buried along with the dead. These decorated burial grounds are some of the best records of Celtic culture.

The cult of death claimed that the Otherworld was rooted in the physical world, sometimes being described as underground or a far away island. Once in the Otherworld, Celts believed that life after death was happy; it was a paradise filled with feasting and happiness. This is one of the reasons for their renowned ferocity on the battlefield - they weren't afraid of death, and meeting their end by the blade of an enemy sword was something to aspire to. Bravery and recklessness in war were glorified and would be boasted about at every opportunity. To the Romans, the cult of death was nothing short of wild barbarism at its worst, but to the Celts, it was a way of life.



The Celts were infamously fearsome in battle as they were unpredictable and ferocious





Death on The Battlefield

With no fear of dying, the Celts were fierce warriors with an unusual habit

Usually fighting without armour, clad in blue woad war paint and tattoos, and occasionally completely naked, a Celt was a force of nature on the ancient battlefield. Wielding swords, daggers or javelins with a shield, Celtic iron crushed the helmets of the Roman legionaries as war cries rang out and musical instruments were blown. After victory, the Celts set about collecting the heads of both fallen comrades and foes as the headhunting began.

For the Celts, falling on the field of battle wasn't the end. Celtic society had a peculiar obsession with human heads, and after an enemy was defeated, severed heads would be hung by their hair over a horse's neck and taken to be nailed to the entrance of a fort or sanctuary. The suggested notion behind this bizarre tradition was that once the head of a vanquished foe was taken, the Celts believed that the victor would receive the spiritual power of the fallen. The heads were later embalmed and displayed as a sign of victory in battle. According to the Celts, the human soul had an afterlife, and as it lived in the head, this had to be kept at all costs. The body, meanwhile, would be hung from wooden frames and put on show while enemy weapons were broken up and buried as songs of victory filled the air.

The Romans had feared the warlike Celts ever since the Sack of Rome in 390 BCE, but this fear soon changed to a burning desire to see them defeated. When Celts were hired as auxiliary soldiers in the Roman army, knowledge of their passion for beheading became widespread. Unlike the Romans, who were an efficient and organised fighting force, the Celts were more flamboyant. Stories tell of one Celtic ruler who drove a chariot made entirely out of silver into battle. The obsession with headhunting didn't end with the Celts and continued in small pockets of Ireland up until the Middle Ages, even as Christianity spread over the Emerald Isle.

Celtic Weapons

The Bronze and Iron Ages witnessed a huge influx of new weaponry for use in both battle and burials

1 Battersea shield

Constructed from bronze sheets and 27 red glass studs, the Battersea Shield was made in Britain between 350 and 50 BCE. Although it is believed to be from the La Tène period, it is difficult to date exactly as its decorative style is not related to any other Celtic object.

2 Waterloo helmet

This helmet dates from around 250-50 BCE and its bronze material means it was far too fragile to have been used in warfare. Instead it is believed that it was used as a ceremonial headdress. It is the only Iron Age helm of its type to have ever been found in Europe.

3 Montefortino helmet

The classic choices of the Roman legionaries, both the Montefortino and Coolus helmets were originally Celtic designs. The conical-shaped headgear was the helmet of choice for the Gauls and first appeared in about 400 BCE. Once the Romans and the Carthaginians got their hands on them, they were mass produced.

4 Wandsworth shield boss

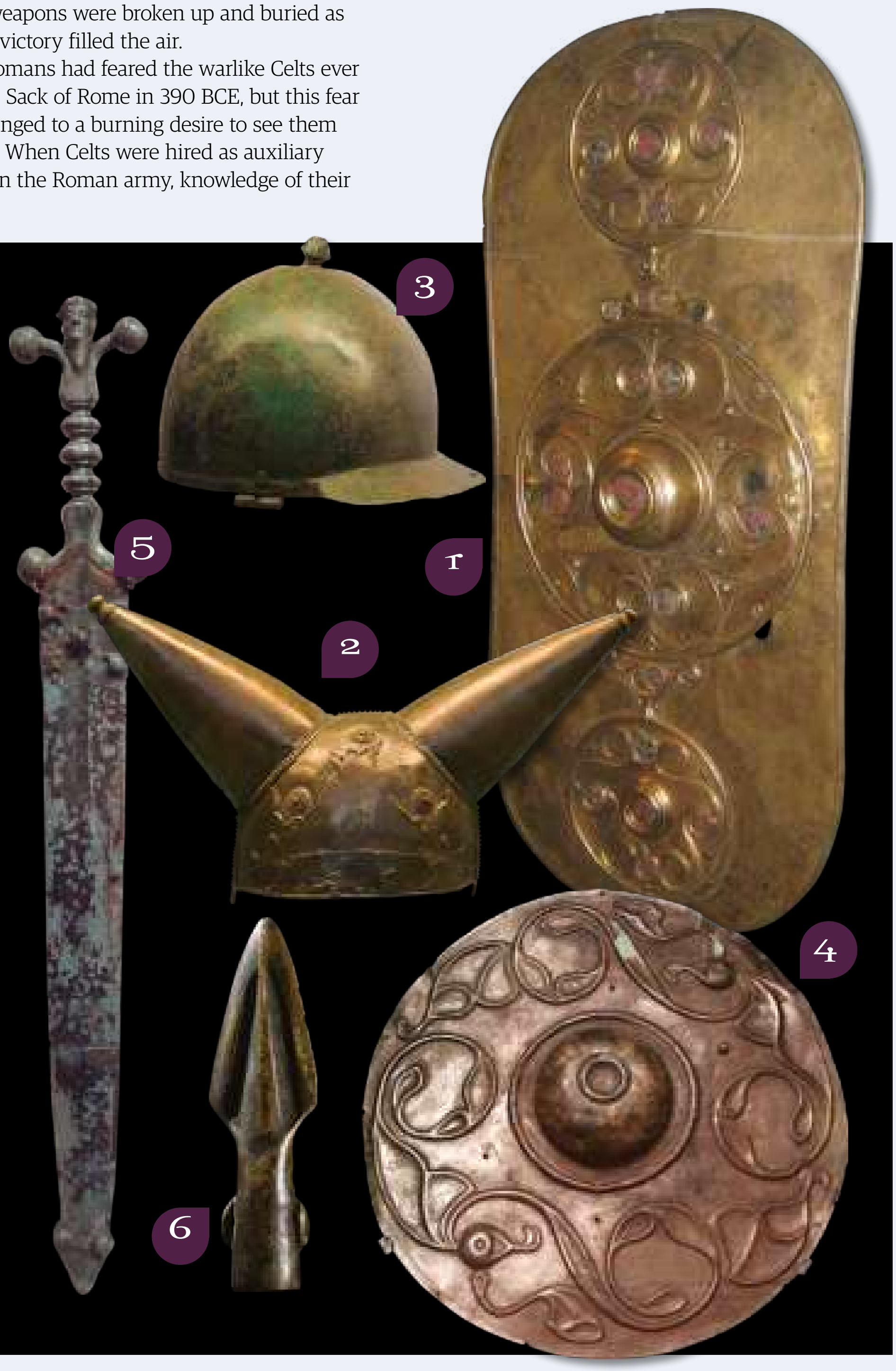
The Celts were big users of shields in battle, usually instead of armour. The shields tended to be oval in shape and could be both wooden and metallic. The boss at the centre of the design was a metal cup used to protect the hand when holding the shield.

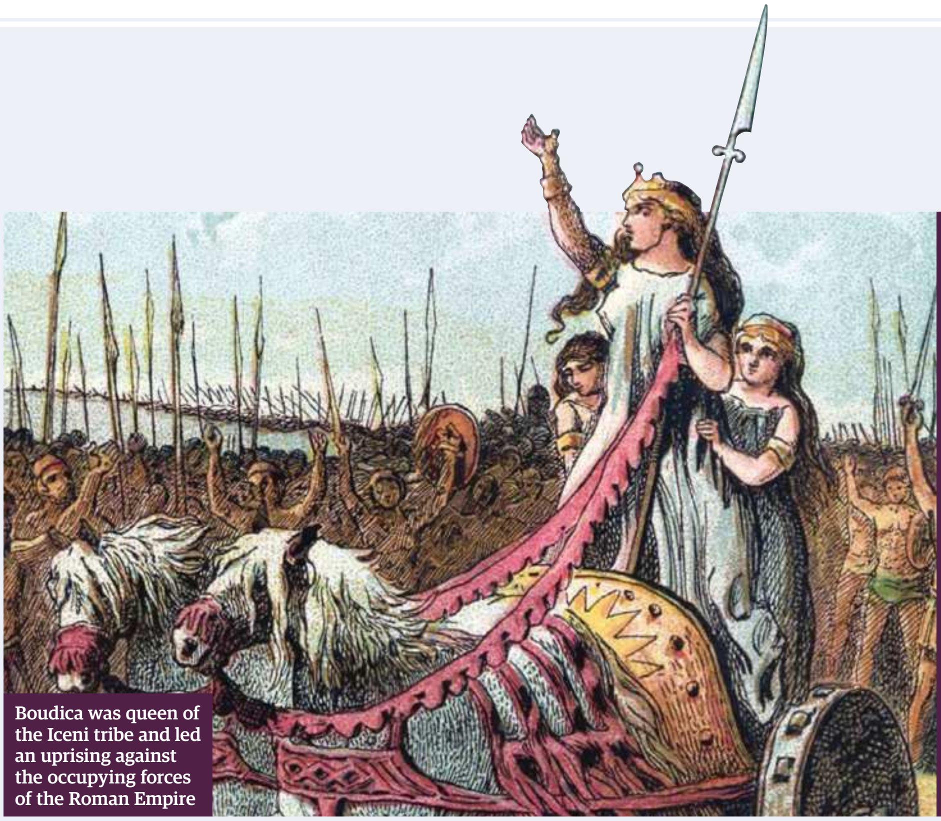
5 Celtic iron sword

Celtic warriors were expert swordsmen and the quality design of their weapons matched their proficiency with a blade. The large iron swords could be up to 90 centimetres in length and were wielded with two hands. Smaller swords also existed that could be used to slice and dice while also carrying a shield.

6 Spears and javelins

The sharp leaf-shaped iron heads were attached to an ash wood pole and thrown at enemy infantry. The first contact with Roman armies persuaded the Celts to narrow the spearheads to be able to puncture legionary armour. They would be collected at the end of the battle along with the heads.





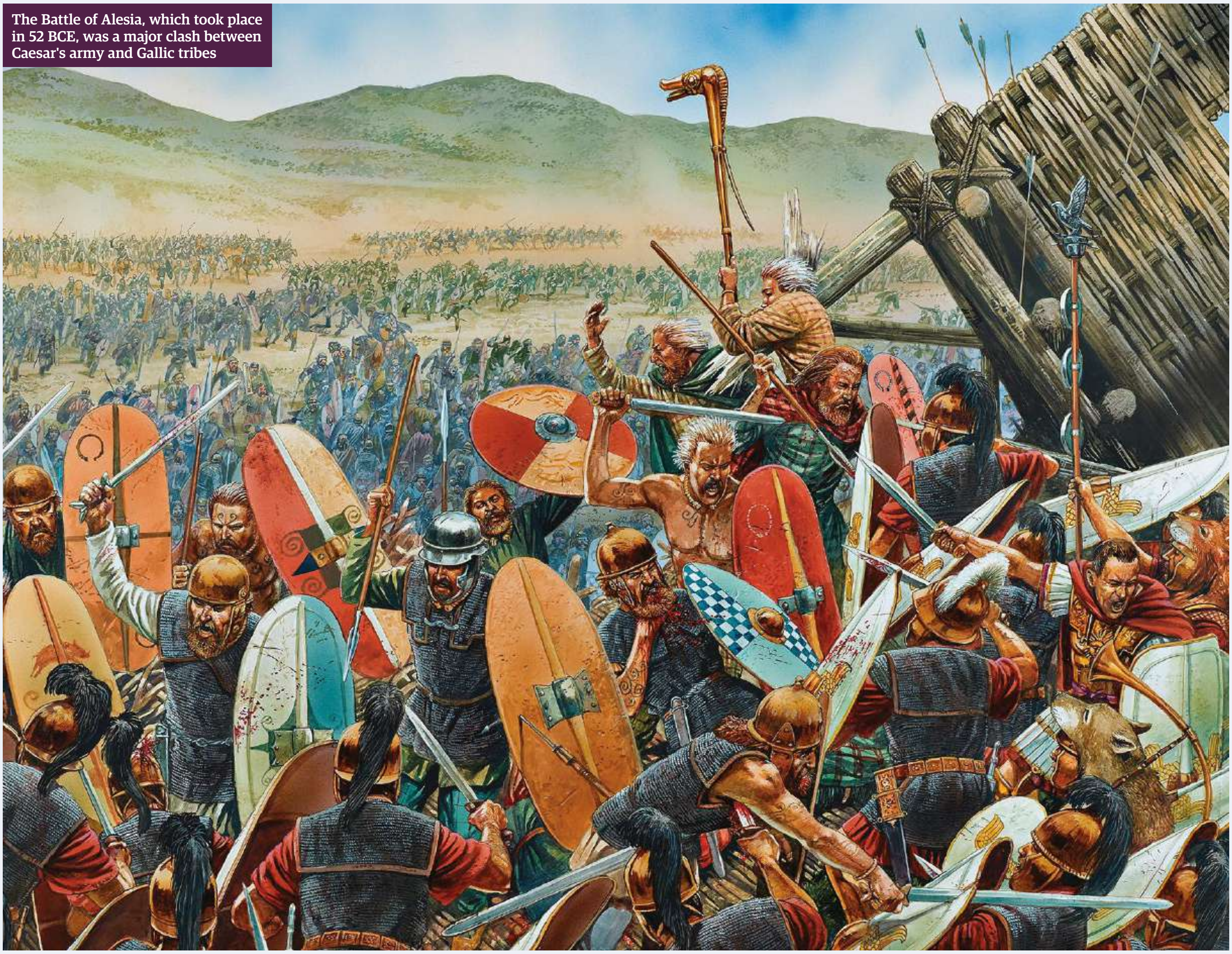
Boudica was queen of the Iceni tribe and led an uprising against the occupying forces of the Roman Empire

Women Warriors

Both on the front line and in peacetime society, women played a huge role as warriors and queens

The Celts were leagues ahead of their counterpart ancient civilisations in gender equality, allowing females to be both warriors and queens, as the likes of Boudica and Cartimandua demonstrate. Although men held the ultimate power, the political freedom and lawful protection given to women was unparalleled compared with Greek and Roman lands. Classical Roman authors were notoriously fearful of the Celtic women as they fought as hard in battle as men. Girls were trained in the arts of war as much as boys, and would learn how to carry weaponry, fight off invaders and even lead their own fighting schools. The Iceni from southeastern England were one of the most prominent tribes to use women in battle as they drove the Romans out of Londinium.

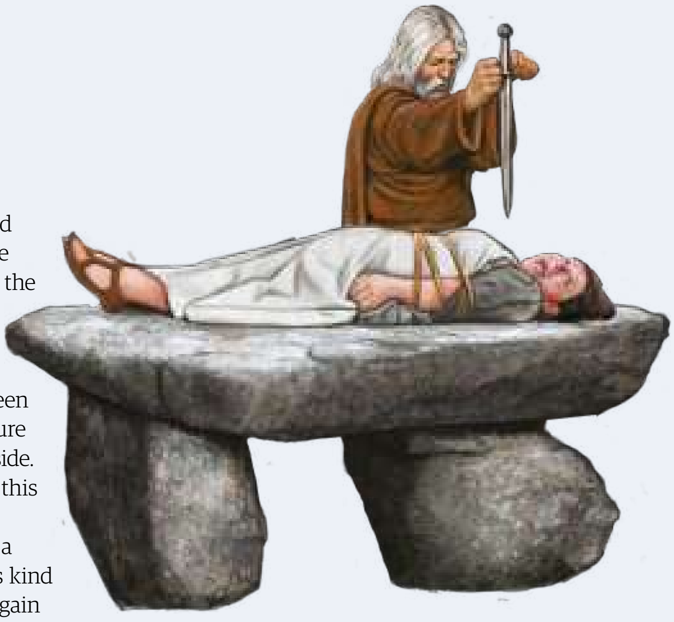
Women were also important in spiritual ways. They could become druids and were not excluded from any occupation. Celtic mythology told of a Land of Women. This island formed part of the conception of the afterlife and, according to the Roman writers Posidonius and Strabo, was a place where men could not go for fear of death as women literally ripped each other apart.



The Battle of Alesia, which took place in 52 BCE, was a major clash between Caesar's army and Gallic tribes

Sacrifice

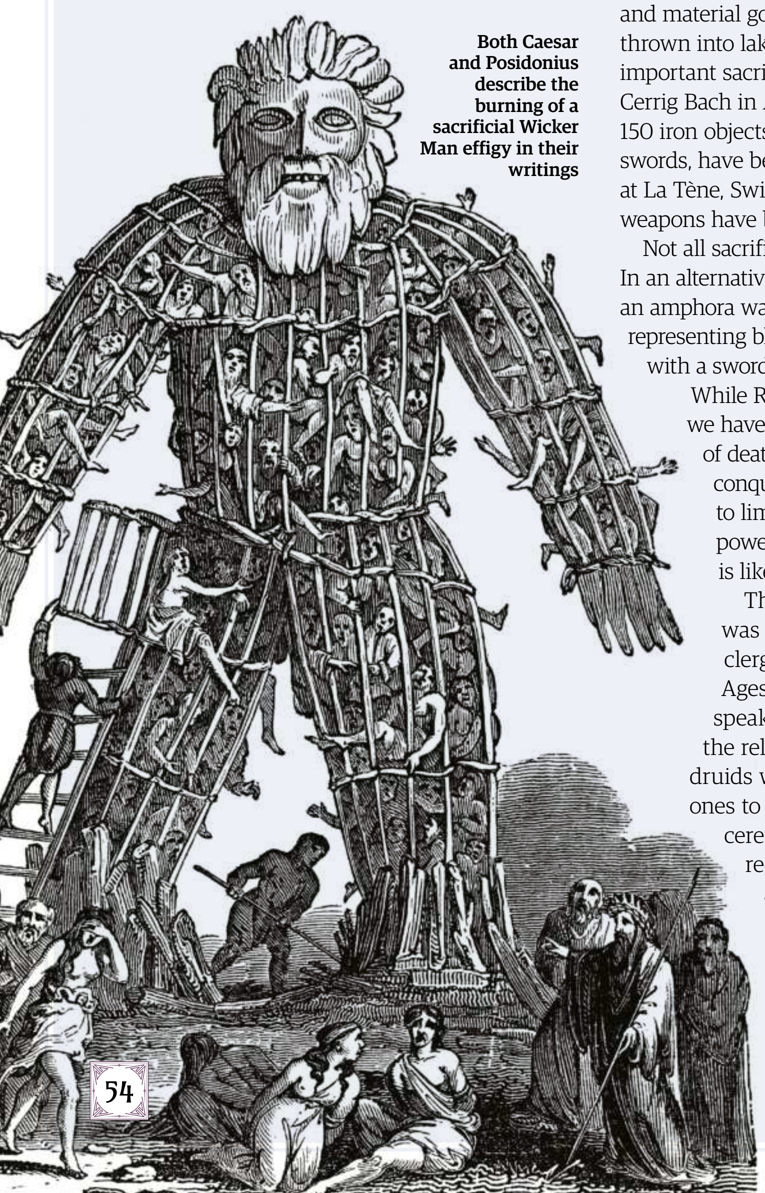
Mythology and the role of gods meant so much to the Celts that sacrificial ceremonies were commonplace



The spiritual gesture of headhunting was only one part of the cult of death. Once the skulls had been removed from the battlefield, it was over to the druids to perform elaborate rituals, including sacrificial offerings. The Celts believed sacrifice encouraged the supernatural world to link with the natural, and this is what kept them performing these rituals.

While there is some debate about whether human sacrifice actually took place, it is referenced by the Roman writers of the era and druidic practice was banned under Emperor Claudius after the successful invasion of Britain. It was written that in one form of human sacrifice, the victim's head would be severed from the body and then the skull completely shattered. This was done to prevent the ghost from wandering free after death.

However, the Celts worshipped a number of gods, and each demanded a different form of sacrificial offering. For instance, those sacrificed to the god of the willow, Esus, would be hanged; those killed in the name of Taranis, the thunder god, would be immolated; those murdered for Toutatis, the god of the people, were drowned. But perhaps the most infamous form of sacrifice in the cult of death was the Wicker Man. Featured in one of Julius Caesar's most well known writings on the Celts' death culture in a tale that has been exaggerated over time, the large wicker structure was burned as an effigy with living people inside. It was supposedly an offering to the gods, but this theory has been disputed.



Both Caesar and Posidonius describe the burning of a sacrificial Wicker Man effigy in their writings

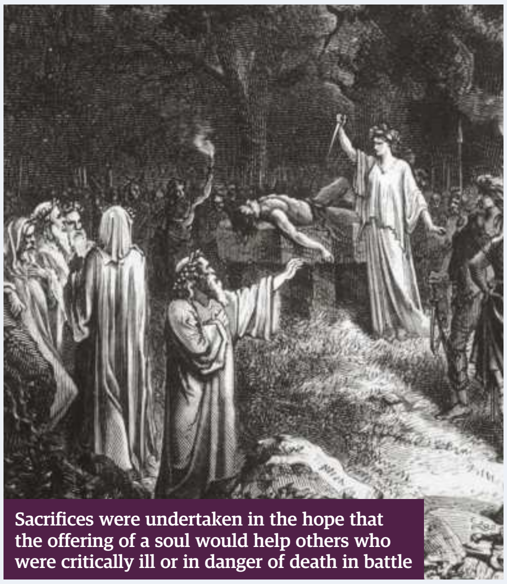
This aspect of the cult of death also offered a way of punishing criminals. Executions of this kind were carried out during a festival and would again vary depending on which god they were dedicated to. One popular punishment was to cut a criminal's stomach open before hanging them from an oak branch in a temple roof.

It wasn't just humans that could be sacrificed in the cult of death. Animals were readily slaughtered if the Celts thought it would appease the gods, and material goods were also destroyed by being thrown into lakes and rivers. One of the most important sacrificial pits ever found is at Llyn Cerrig Bach in Anglesey, Wales, where more than 150 iron objects, including spears, shields and swords, have been unearthed. There is also a site at La Tène, Switzerland, where huge amounts of weapons have been dredged from Lake Neuchâtel.

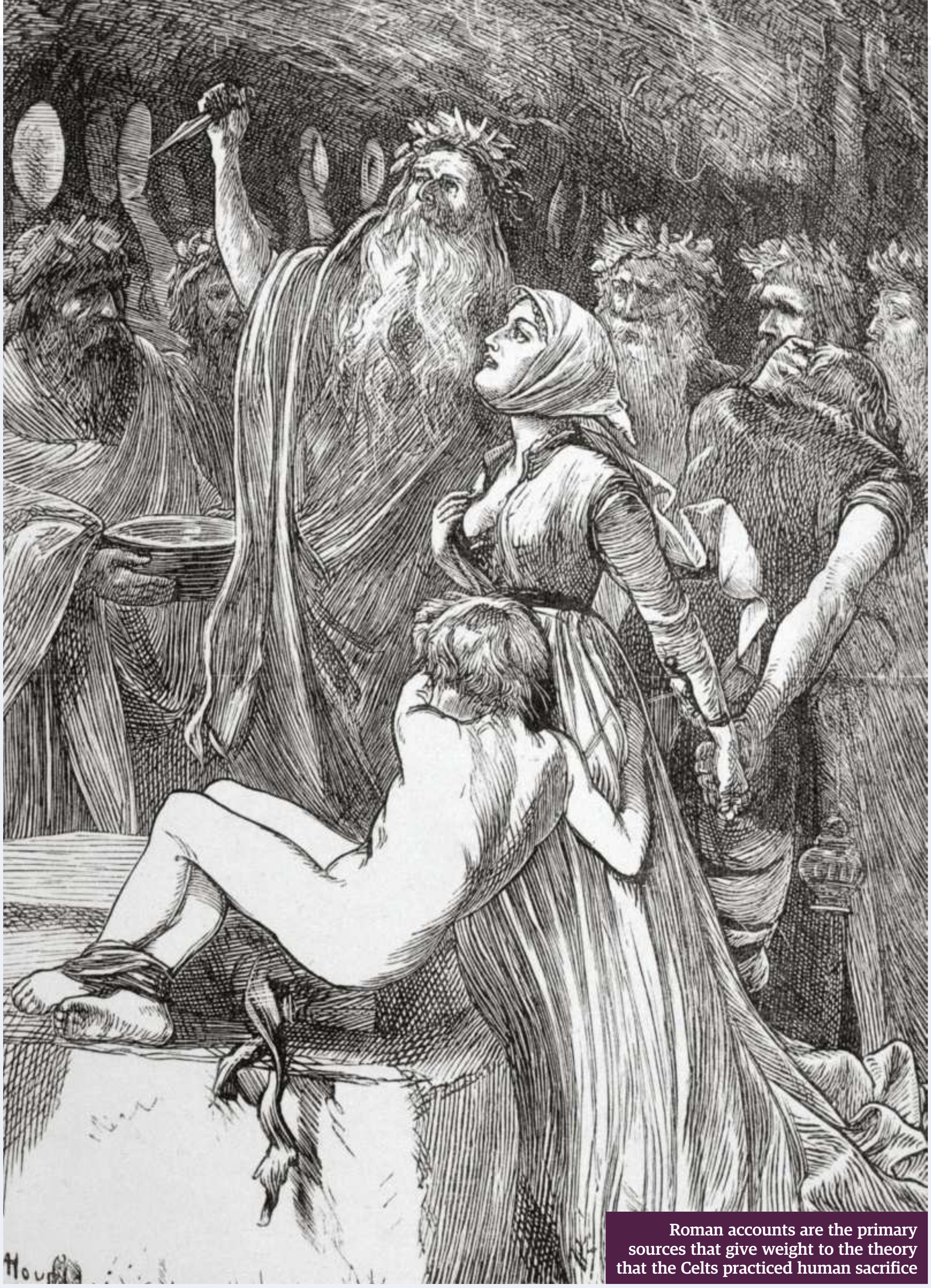
Not all sacrifices required bloodshed and loss. In an alternative to human and animal sacrifice, an amphora was filled to the brim with wine – representing blood – and then the top was cut off with a sword to emulate a decapitation.

While Roman writings are the best sources we have on druidism and sacrifice in the cult of death, it is well known that in order to conquer the Celts, the Romans attempted to limit the influence of the exceptionally powerful druids. Therefore, their portrayal is likely as scathing as possible.

The druids' elevated status in society was a precursor to what the Christian clergy would become in the Middle Ages, and they had the rare ability to speak before kings while in council. As the religious class in Celtic society, the druids would have most likely been the ones to carry out sacrifices, as well as other ceremonies. One of the craziest rituals recorded by the Romans was known as 'Bull Sleep', which involved a person being fed bull flesh and then sleeping wrapped in its hide. When they awoke, they would know who would be the next king.



Sacrifices were undertaken in the hope that the offering of a soul would help others who were critically ill or in danger of death in battle



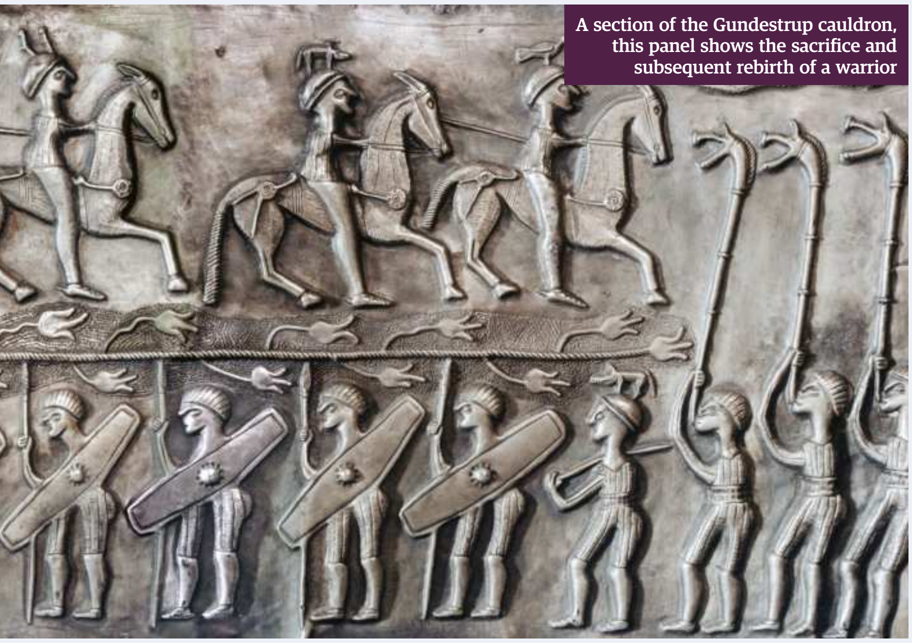
Roman accounts are the primary sources that give weight to the theory that the Celts practiced human sacrifice

Did druids practise human sacrifice?

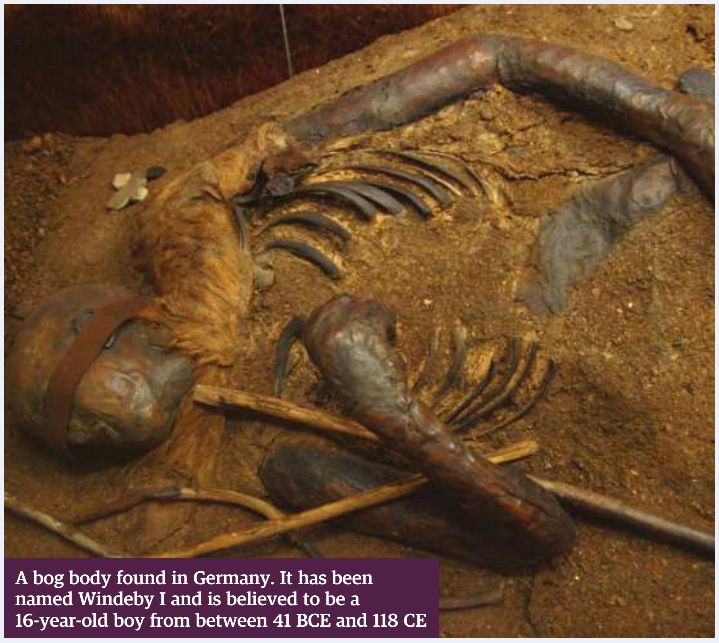
Dr Andrew Jennings, UHI Centre for Nordic Studies

There is no reason to doubt Caesar's claim that the druids carried out human sacrifice. Life was offered to the gods in return for life. So someone afflicted with a serious disease or a warrior fighting a battle would offer a human sacrifice in return for their life, and the druids would carry it out. An animal was no substitute and criminals were pleasing to the gods, but if they were in short supply, the innocent would do. However, we don't know what the Celtic gods wanted the spirits of the sacrificed for.

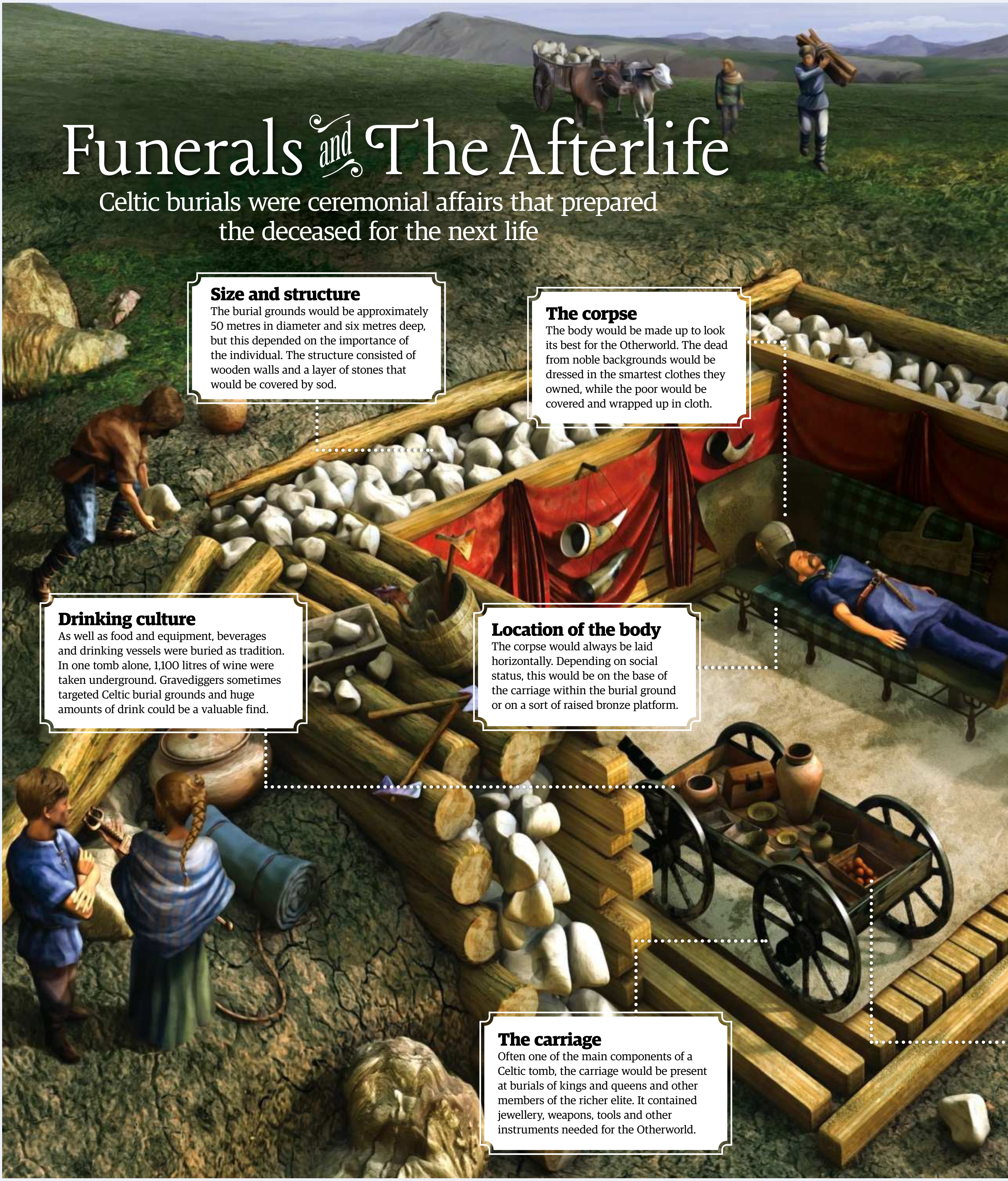
Caesar also tells us about that most gruesome of sacrifice the Wicker Man, where an immense statue of twigs was filled with victims and set alight. He also remarks that druidism originated in Britain, so it's no surprise to hear from Tacitus that blood-soaked altars existed among the British Celts. Further afield, the Galatians, a Celtic people who settled in Turkey, reportedly sacrificed their prisoners after a battle in 165 BCE. The Celts were not odd for carrying out human sacrifice. Tollund Man, a Danish bog body, is mummified proof that the contemporary Germanic peoples did it too.



A section of the Gundestrup cauldron, this panel shows the sacrifice and subsequent rebirth of a warrior



A bog body found in Germany. It has been named Windeby I and is believed to be a 16-year-old boy from between 41 BCE and 118 CE



Funerals and The Afterlife

Celtic burials were ceremonial affairs that prepared the deceased for the next life

Size and structure
The burial grounds would be approximately 50 metres in diameter and six metres deep, but this depended on the importance of the individual. The structure consisted of wooden walls and a layer of stones that would be covered by sod.

The corpse
The body would be made up to look its best for the Otherworld. The dead from noble backgrounds would be dressed in the smartest clothes they owned, while the poor would be covered and wrapped up in cloth.

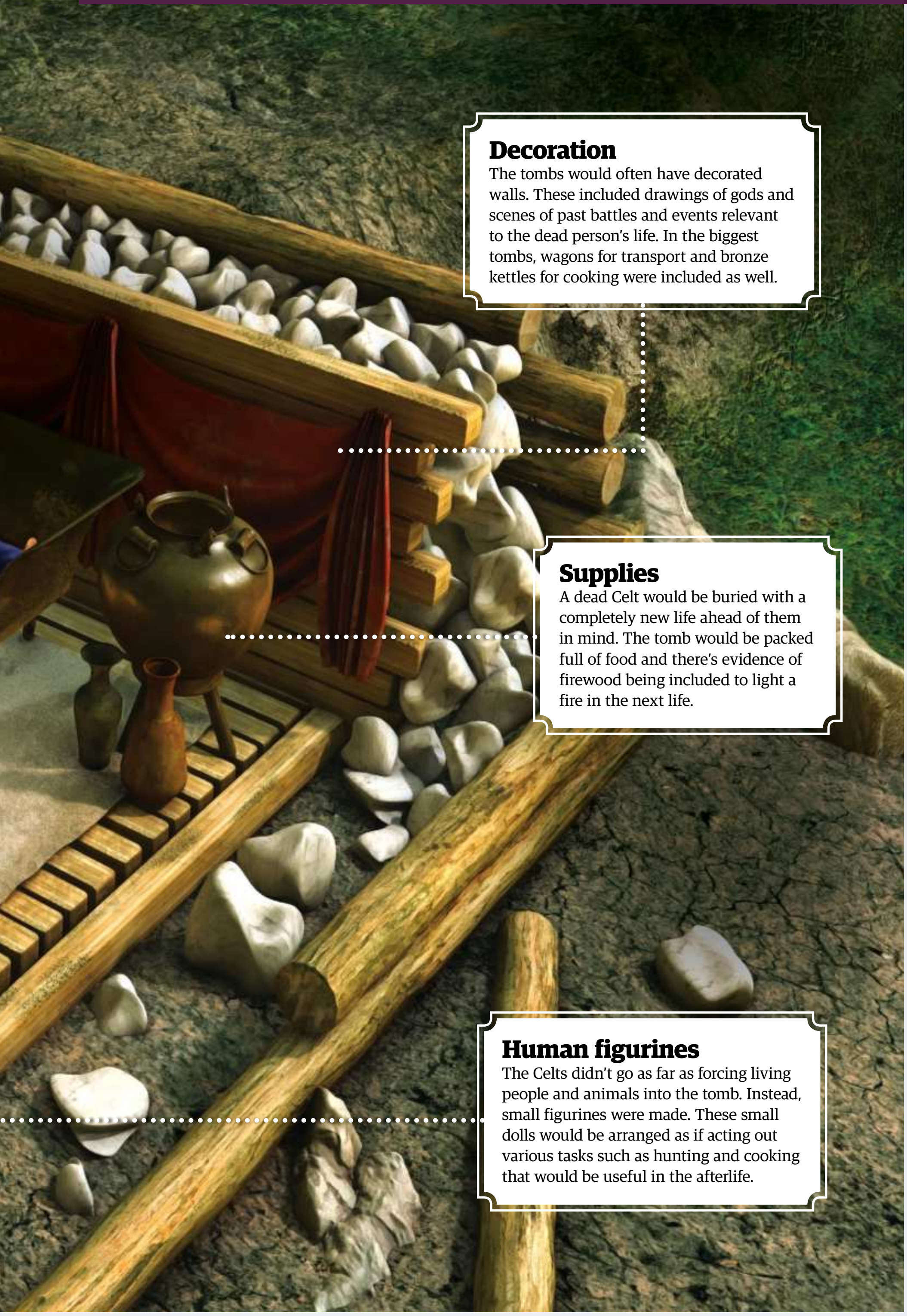
Drinking culture
As well as food and equipment, beverages and drinking vessels were buried as tradition. In one tomb alone, 1,100 litres of wine were taken underground. Gravediggers sometimes targeted Celtic burial grounds and huge amounts of drink could be a valuable find.

Location of the body
The corpse would always be laid horizontally. Depending on social status, this would be on the base of the carriage within the burial ground or on a sort of raised bronze platform.

The carriage
Often one of the main components of a Celtic tomb, the carriage would be present at burials of kings and queens and other members of the richer elite. It contained jewellery, weapons, tools and other instruments needed for the Otherworld.

What happened to the Celts?

Celtic culture disintegrated during and after the end of the Roman Empire. Germanic tribes ransacked the dwindling empire and the Celts were forced to retreat to small pockets of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Brittany in France. The Roman Catholic Church had a huge say in the dissolution and memory of Celtic culture. Druidism is believed to have left the history books by approximately 700 CE before continuing briefly underground. When Catholicism took over the British Isles, pagan sites were turned into cathedrals and the pagan gods were either forgotten or became associated with saints. Breton, Manx, Welsh and Erse Gaelic languages still survive in areas of the British Isles and Europe in some way, ensuring that the traditional customs and culture of the Celts lives on.



Decoration
The tombs would often have decorated walls. These included drawings of gods and scenes of past battles and events relevant to the dead person's life. In the biggest tombs, wagons for transport and bronze kettles for cooking were included as well.

Supplies
A dead Celt would be buried with a completely new life ahead of them in mind. The tomb would be packed full of food and there's evidence of firewood being included to light a fire in the next life.

Human figurines
The Celts didn't go as far as forcing living people and animals into the tomb. Instead, small figurines were made. These small dolls would be arranged as if acting out various tasks such as hunting and cooking that would be useful in the afterlife.

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Celtic funerals were held in areas that were considered sacred, like woodland groves and natural springs. The Iron Age is when we begin to find evidence for the burial of ordinary people. Prior to this, burial was reserved for the elite, who were placed in elaborate tombs rather than the hole-in-the-ground graves that became the norm during the Celtic period.

Many Celts, both on the continent and in Britain, embraced the new Roman culture thrust upon them, initiating what was known as the Gallo-Roman period. This had effects on funeral ceremonies, which were now undertaken in temples known as 'fanums' built on sacred ground. These culture differences, plus the fact that the Celts were not a centralised society, means Celtic religious views are less well known than other ancient civilisations.

Like the Nordic Valhalla and the Ancient Greek underworld, the Celts had their own theories on life after death. The Otherworld was believed to look like a group of islands in the sea and was also called the 'Delightful Plain' or 'Land of the Young'. Here there was no sickness, old age or death, and happiness lasted forever. The journey to the Otherworld was mentioned in Irish tales and tells of a beautiful girl sailing a hero away on a boat of glass. Waterfalls were believed to have been the main access points to the Otherworld and, as a result, gifts were left by them or thrown into them as offerings to the gods. The spiritual power of waterfalls was believed to be so great that streams had the power to heal injury. Tales told of the transmigration of these immortal souls include those of 'Fintan', who lived as a man, a stag and an eagle and the two great Bulls of Erin, who became sacred after a rebirth from human form. These epic stories motivated the Celts to continue ritualistic practices and give their all in battle.

From the highest rungs of society to the lowest, Celts expected to keep their status when they went to the Otherworld. By having their proudest and most important belongings buried with them, their transportation would be made as smooth as possible. Some of the most important items to be buried with the Celts were their weapons. In Celtic burial sites across Europe, helmets, shields, daggers and axes have been found, all of which are intricately designed. The equipment itself wasn't made of material as sturdy as would be found on the Iron Age battlefield and is believed to have been for more of a ceremonial use and for the dead to take with them on their journey to the afterlife.

There is one part of the Celtic cult of death that survives in a form today, and that is Samhain. One of the influences for the contemporary celebration of Halloween, the festival occurred on 31 October, or harvest's end. The tradition was to extinguish the fire in the home and light a communal fire in the village. Here, druids told that the boundaries to the Otherworld were temporarily closed and the spirits could mix with the living. Masks and costumes were worn, influencing the costumes we see during Halloween celebrations today.

Viking Dead: Myths and Practices

From valkyries to Valhalla – how the Vikings saw the world to come

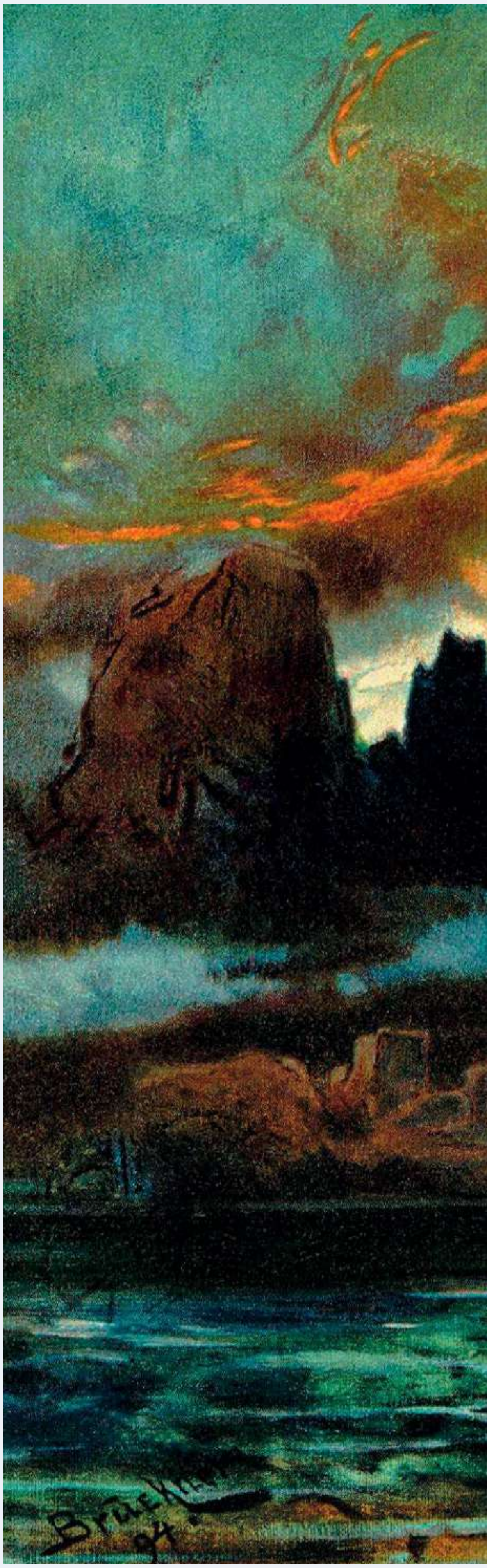
Written by Wayne Bartlett

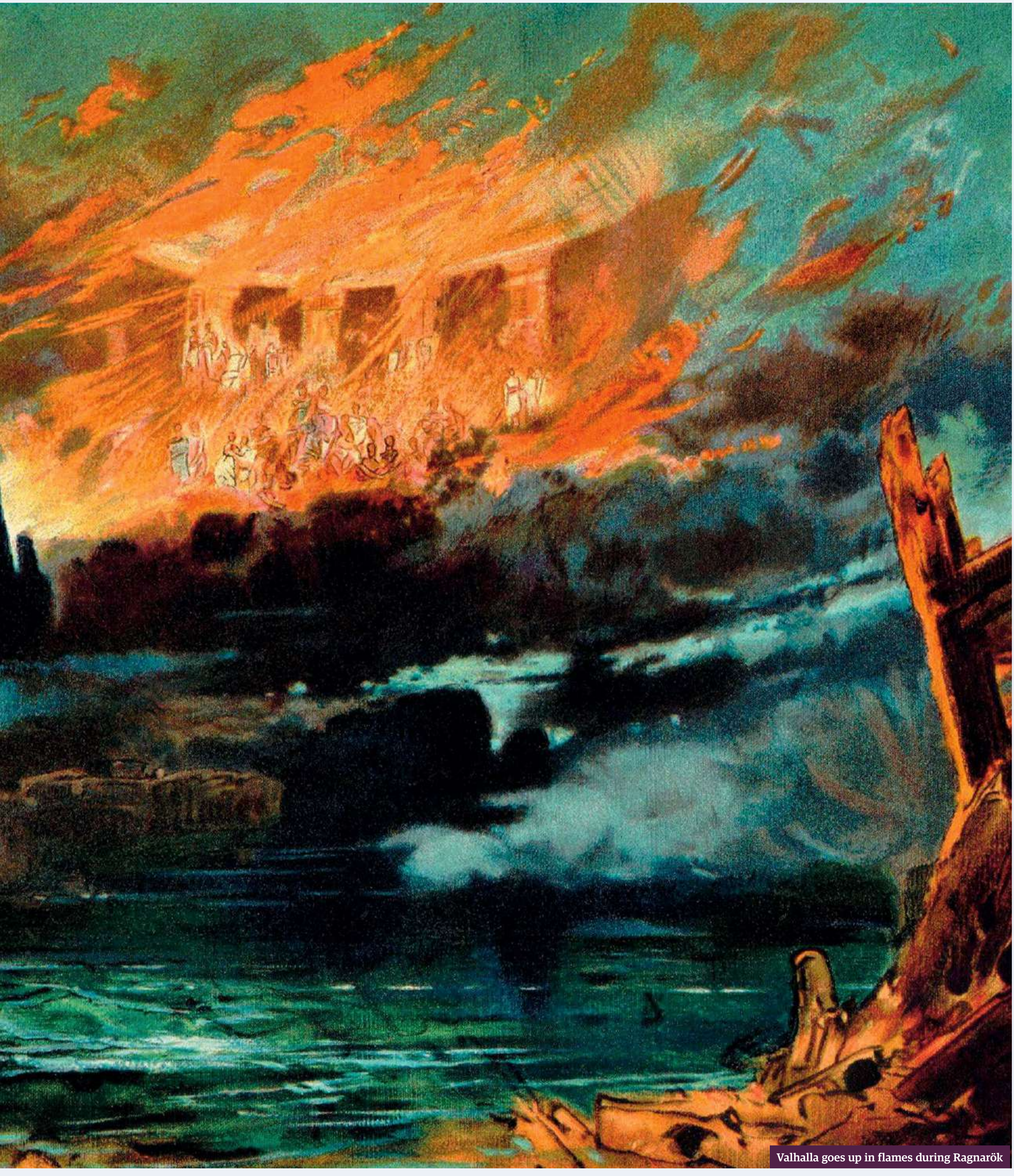
The 'classic' Viking era lasted for about 250 years, from the end of the 8th century to the middle of the 11th. In that time much changed, including Viking religion. At the beginning of the era, the Vikings were pagan warriors and wanderers but by its end many were Christians. This change in religion also led to a change in burial practices and beliefs. Many pagan burials were interred with grave goods, something that was taboo to the Christian Church. But in reality Viking burial practices were also changeable even in pagan times. Sometimes inhumation, burial of the body, was preferred while at others cremation was performed. One of the fascinations of Viking burial practices is how flexible beliefs and rituals were.

Heaven And Hel

What we know of Viking death and burial is gleaned from several main sources. Viking religion and mythology was written up in saga form, particularly in a work called the *Prose Edda*, written in Iceland in the 13th century by the renowned Snorri Sturluson who specialised in this form of literature. Sturluson was a marvellous wordsmith and historians are indebted to him, but Iceland had been Christianised for over two centuries when he wrote it. This is reflected in the content of the *Prose Edda* which shows marked Christian influences in places. But the underlying stories of Viking mythology that are contained in the work record amazing details which would otherwise be lost to us. Added to these saga references some incredible archaeological finds enhance our understanding of such matters; and references on rune stones, using the Vikings' basic 'stick-shaped' alphabet, also complement the body of knowledge that survives.

The Viking concepts of Heaven and Hell were very different to the Christianised versions they later adopted. To understand more, a brief introduction to the Viking gods is necessary. There were many of them, including Odin, the All-Father (also known as the Father of the Slain), and Thor, the god of thunder. The god Loki was a trickster, always trying to better the other gods, and in the end his tricks help to bring about Ragnarök, the end time, which even most of the gods are unable to survive. Loki has three children, one of whom, a daughter named Hel, is sent into Niflheim, the underworld, where she is responsible for giving out places to those who have died of old age or disease. Her sinister character is revealed in part by the names of her possessions. Her hall is called Eljudnir ('sprayed with snowstorms'), she has a dish called 'Hunger', her knife is 'Famine', her slave is called 'Lazy' and she has a maid called 'Slothful'. She is, in other words, dangerous and deadly and those who serve her are up to no good. She is a monstrous figure, half-black and half-white and is described as 'gloomy and cruel'. When entering her realm of the dead, those unfortunate enough to be there cross a threshold known as Fallandaforad, which means 'falling into peril'. She sleeps in Kor – 'sick bed' – with bed-curtains called Blikjandabol, which means 'gleaming disaster'. This is not a woman you want to meet.

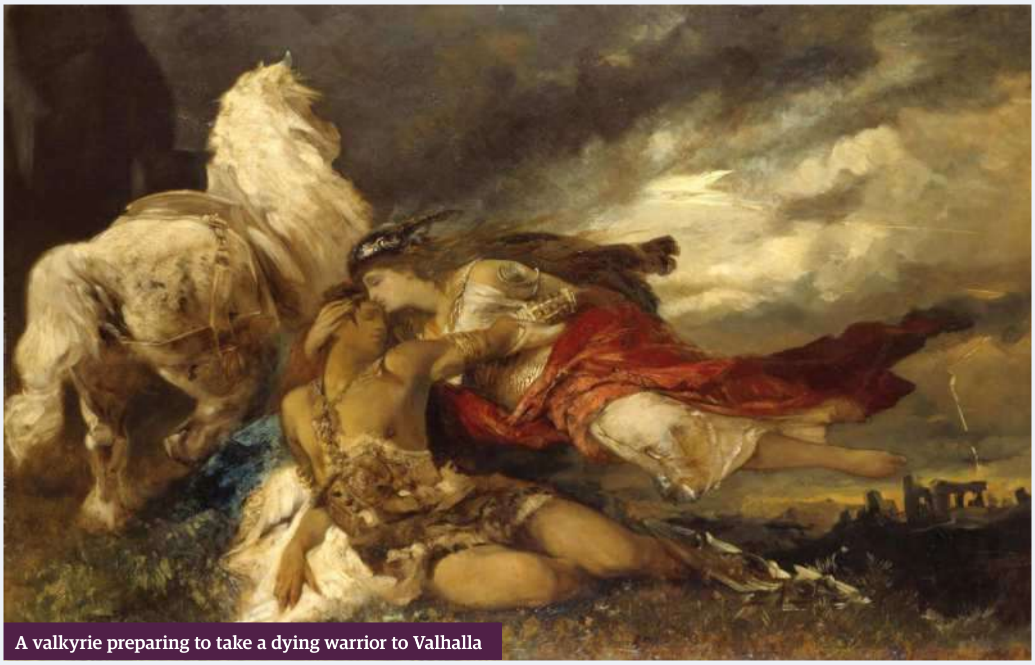




Valhalla goes up in flames during Ragnarök

But the Vikings had a very martial culture and few warriors wanted to spend their afterlife in Niflheim. They sought after something very different – Valhalla, 'the hall of the dead'. Valhalla is the hall where the god Odin houses the dead whom he deems worthy to serve him. The Old Norse poem *Grímnismál* ('The Song of the Hooded One'), tells us how the roof of the 'gold-bright' Valhalla is made of shields, and has spears for its rafters. Seats made of breastplates surround the many feasting tables of the vast hall. Its gates are guarded by wolves, and eagles fly above it. The dead who reside in Valhalla – the einherjar as they are known, literally 'those who fight alone' – live a life that would have been the envy of any Viking warrior. Every day, all day, they fight one another, seeking to outdo each other in terms of their heroism. But every evening, their wounds are miraculously healed. Then they feast splendidly. Their meat comes from the boar Saehrimnir, who is reborn every time he is slaughtered and butchered. Their drink is mead from the udder of the goat Heidrun. But they will not live this charmed life forever. Odin will summon them to his aid in his struggle against the wolf Fenrir during Ragnarök – a battle in which Odin and the souls with him are doomed to perish and the world of the gods comes to an end.

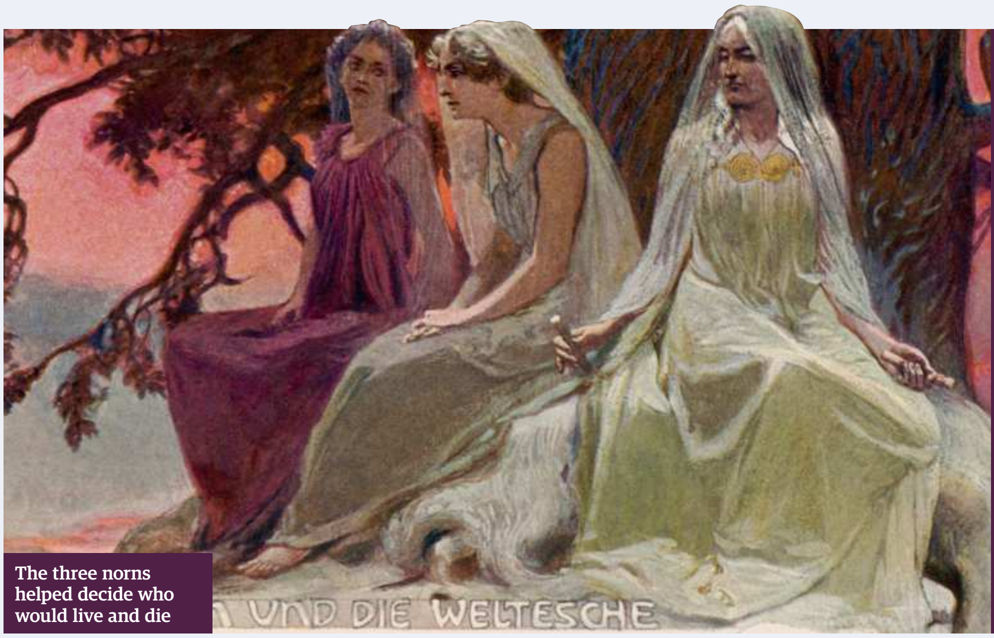
So how then does a warrior get in to Valhalla? In Norse mythology, this is the job of a valkyrie (Old Norse: valkyrja), female humans (possibly former nobles) who have been chosen to identify worthy entrants. Their role is to decide which of the fallen warriors that have died bravely in battle will go to the afterlife in Valhalla. Valkyrja is actually two words combined, val, 'dead body on a battlefield', kyrja 'chooser'. Valkyries are perhaps more succinctly described as 'choosers of the dead'. When a battle is fought, Odin will send the valkyries to watch over it. Three in particular, Gunnr, Rota and a norn called Skuld perform this task. The valkyries hover over the battlefield (like birds picking out their prey) mounted on their horses dressed in their battle gear with a spear in their hand.


A valkyrie preparing to take a dying warrior to Valhalla

"The dead in Valhalla live a life that would have been the envy of any Viking warrior"

They will judge among the fallen and select the bravest of the warriors to join them in the afterlife. They also adjudicate on the ultimate outcome of the battle. Those selected will be brought to Asgard, where many of the gods live. Here the goddess Freyja has the right to choose half for her field called Fólkvangr. When she has picked her half, the rest will go to Valhalla, the hall of Odin (the gods have their own specific halls in Asgard). Dr Jackson Crawford who is an expert in Norse mythology has speculated that Fólkvangr may in fact just be another name for Valhalla. Highlighting Freyja by mentioning that she gets to choose half of the noble dead could have been an indication of her importance. It is possible that Freyja is the one who is in charge of the valkyries.

The valkyries are apparently allowed to roam around the lands of Midgard, or Earth, the land where humans live, when they are not needed. Odin even allows some of them to take the shape of a beautiful white swan, but if a valkyrie is seen by a human without their swan-like disguise, she will become mortal and will never be able to return



The three norns helped decide who would live and die

The Three Norns

Arbiters of life and death in the Viking world

The norns played a key role in life and death. There were three main norns: Urd (Fate), Verdandi (Becoming) and Skuld (Obligation). They shape the lives of humans and also when they die. These three are giant maidens. However, there are many other norns who come to each person at birth like a pagan version of a guardian angel. Viking parents would have prayed fervently that the norns who looked after their children were of the protective kind. Some norns are descended from the Æsir (the gods), others from elves, and a third group from dwarves; or as the sagas put it more poetically in Tolkien-esque terms 'some are of Æsir-kin, some are of Elf-kind, some are Dvalinn's daughters'. Given this diversity of origins, it is perhaps unsurprising that the lot of human beings varies so much. Some have long and fulfilled lives, others have short, sad existences; it all depends ultimately on what kind of norn you have looking after you. The norns also play a part in watering the roots of Yggdrasil, a mighty ash tree under whose branches the gods hold court.

to Valhalla. Their duties are not restricted to the battlefield; they also serve at the tables in Valhalla.

Viking Ship Burials

Many of the Viking dead, or at least those of the more important members of society, were interred in burial mounds. Birka, on the island of Björkö, near Stockholm, Sweden, contains literally hundreds of graves often with precious items from across the then-known world interred with the honoured dead. Included among the finds there is a silver ring from a Viking-era grave. What makes this so special is that it has an Arabic inscription on it, making it the only one of its kind found at a Scandinavian archaeological site. There was also a great deal of amber found in the graves. Although amber is widespread around the Baltic it is not naturally found near Birka and this demonstrates that this was a major trading site.

Invaluable though such graves are, it is ship burials that perhaps seize the imagination more than anything else. Perhaps the most remarkable example of this is the Oseberg ship, housed in Oslo in a purpose-built museum. It is over 70 feet long, 17 feet wide and just short of five feet deep. It has 15 pairs of oar holes and the 30 oars were buried with it. It has been dated to around 820 CE and would have been used for coastal traffic. Axes and kitchen equipment were buried with it. There are also some remarkable artefacts interred with it, including sleighs and a cart. The ship itself is amazingly intact and has survived the passage of 12 centuries in a remarkable state.

Equally remarkable was the burial chamber that was placed in the middle of this amazing grave. This was a timber box with a tent-like cover of roughly carved oak. Although it had been plundered at some time in the 10th century CE, the skeletons of two women were still there when the ship was excavated in 1904. One was in her eighties and apparently suffered badly from arthritis and the other was about three decades younger and had a broken collarbone (though she had not necessarily been sacrificed as the break had started to heal). Although we do not know for sure who these ladies are, it has been suggested that the older woman was a famous Viking queen, Åsa, who died in about 834 CE, and that Oseberg derives from 'Asa's berg', berg meaning grave mound. It has also been suggested that the younger woman was a hofgyðja or priestess, though no confirmatory evidence of this has been found. Åsa was a semi-legendary figure who was the grandmother of Harald Fairhair, the first king of Norway. Along with these human remains, another incredibly important survival in the burial were rare Viking textiles which had been preserved due to the cold Norwegian climate.

However, in their own way Viking ship burials at the other end of the scale can be equally suggestive. Ardnamurchan in Scotland is the most westerly point in mainland Britain and was adjacent to major Viking shipping lanes sailing up and down from Ireland and the Western Isles. In 2011 a Viking boat burial was found at Swordle Bay. The vessel was much more modest than the Oseberg ship but is the first such burial to be found in mainland Britain. Very fragmentary human remains were found as well as a collection of artefacts. These include a spear and a shield,

leading to suggestions that the burial was of a warrior. Also found was a drinking horn, some pottery and a bronze ring pin from Ireland. Nearby was a much older Neolithic burial chamber, hinting that older sites may have continued to hold significance for Vikings millennia later. It is a known fact that a magnificent prehistoric site at Maes Howe on Orkney was used for a Viking drinking party thousands of years later; Viking graffiti inside the tomb shows as much.

Funeral Pyres

Every year in Shetland, on the last Tuesday in January, crowds throng the streets. They make their way through Lerwick in an exuberant procession. They carry flaming torches and the climax of the evening is when they set a replica Viking ship ablaze. It is a kind of homage to a long-held tradition. A majority of Shetlanders have traces of Viking blood in their veins and, as well as having a marvellous time, they are also honouring their ancestors. Yet while it would be nice to think that these traditions have been played out since the time of the Vikings, now a millennium in the past, Up Helly Aa, as the festival is called, has only been going since 1881; and in reality accounts of real-life Viking ship-burning funeral ceremonies are few and far between.

However, what stories of the phenomenon lack in quantity they make up for in quality. In or around 921, an Arab ambassador named Ahmad ibn Fadlan journeyed into the lands of the Rus. The Rus were adventurers of Swedish origin who became expert travellers and traders, making their way down from the Far North to Constantinople and back again. They set up a series of bases along great rivers like the Volga and Dnieper and it was at one of these that the ambassador met some of the Rus. He spent some time with them and learned their customs. In his written account he tells how if a poor man dies he will be cremated in a small boat.

The Oseberg ship - the last resting place of two 9th century Viking women

“The dead man’s friends strangled the slave while the Angel of Death stabbed her”

What Ibn Fadlan is most famous for though is the account he wrote of a Viking funeral for one of the Rus leaders. On a great man’s death, one of his slaves - who could be either male or female - was asked to volunteer to accompany their master on his journey. Once they have chosen to do so, there is no going back; they must go through with it. On the occasion witnessed by Ibn Fadlan, a young woman volunteered and spent the next few days in a state of sublime happiness, drinking and singing. In the meantime, a splendid set of clothes was made for the dead man. When all was ready, a ship was pulled from out of the water and erected on a platform that had been specially built. A bed was placed on the ship and festooned with the finest Byzantine silk. Then an old woman, sinisterly known as the ‘Angel of Death’, appeared.

In the meantime, the dead man was exhumed for he had been temporarily buried until all was ready. The ambassador noted that, apart from his turning black, he looked the same as he did when he had died. He was then dressed in his newly made clothes; trousers, socks, boots, a tunic and a caftan. A brocade cap was put on his head and he was sat on the bed, supported by cushions. Food - bread, meat and onions, along with fruit and basil - was also laid out. Soon, it was time for the slave girl to join him and now things took a horrific turn. After they had had sex with her, the dead man’s friends strangled the slave while the Angel of Death stabbed her. Animals - dogs, horses, a cockerel, a hen and cows - were also killed and thrown onto the ship. The ship was then set ablaze and once the flames had died out a great

The tent-like burial chamber on the Oseberg ship

The Gokstad Ship

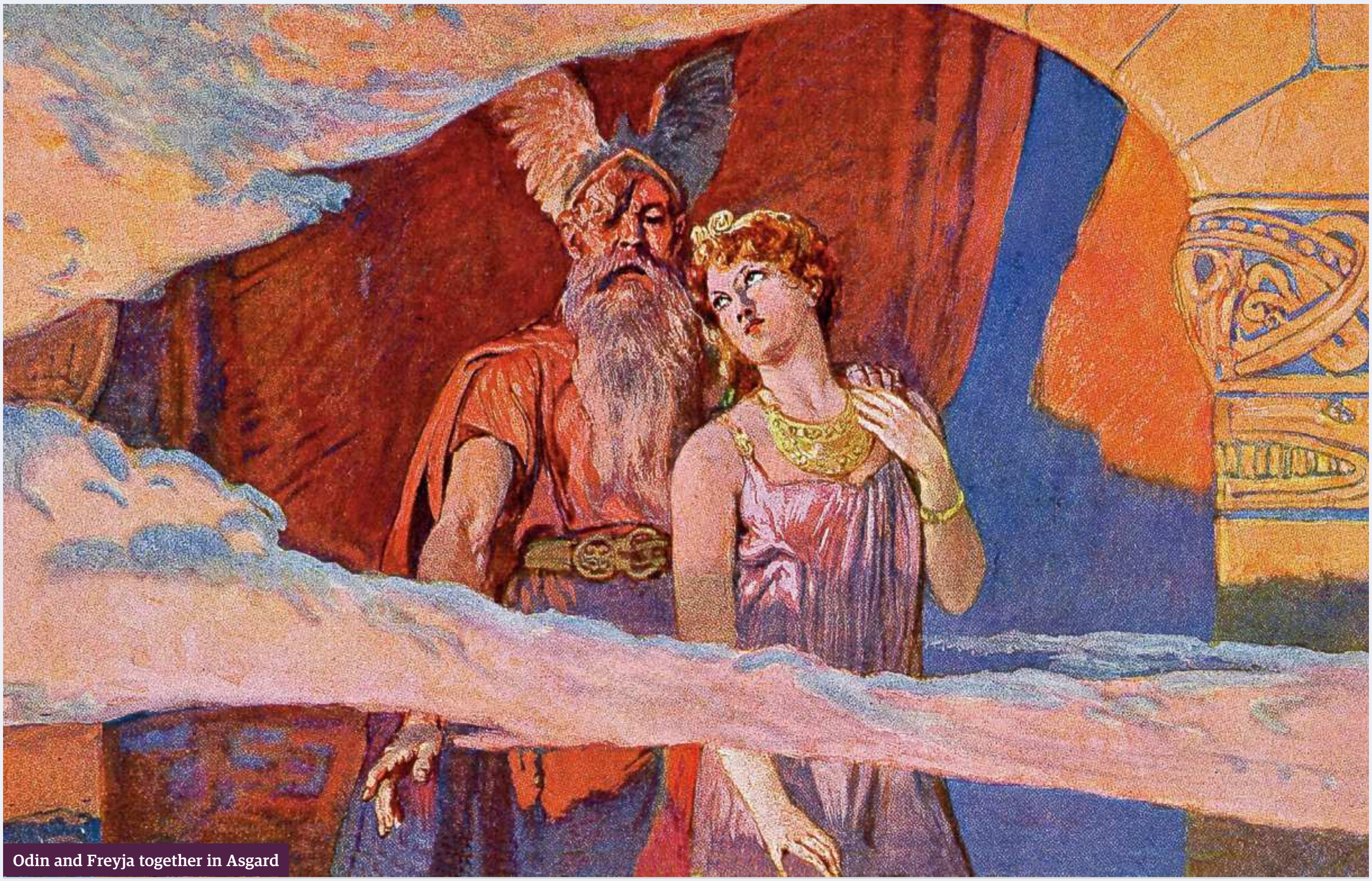
How a rich Viking spent eternity

The Oseberg ship shares its museum home with another magnificently complete vessel, the Gokstad ship. This was built to carry 32 oarsmen, and the oar holes could be hatched down when the ship was under sail. Dendrochronological (tree-ring dating) data suggests that the ship was built of timber harvested in around 890 CE. This period saw the height of Norse expansion in Dublin, Ireland and York (Jorvik), England. It was probably commissioned at the end of the 9th century during the reign of Harald Fairhair. The ship could carry a crew of between 40 to 70 men.

The ship was excavated in 1880. During the excavations, a human skeleton was found in a bed inside a timber-built burial chamber, the remains of a powerfully-built man aged about 50; his precise identity is unknown. The bones of 12 horses, six dogs, and one peacock were found laid out around the man's body; the peacock is particularly interesting as the bird was a Christian symbol of resurrection. The grave was furnished with grave goods: three small boats, a tent, a sledge, and riding equipment. Other grave goods were probably plundered long ago: the excavation found no gold or silver. In the Viking period, weapons were considered an important part of a man's grave goods but none were found in the Gokstad ship.

While apparently recreating an ancient Viking burial ritual, the Up Helly Aa festival is of fairly recent provenance

A modern replica of the Gokstad ship



Odin and Freyja together in Asgard

grave mound was thrown up to commemorate the dead man. It is not difficult to understand why such a ceremony had a profound effect on Ibn Fadlan.

> "The hero and the draugr battle through the hall... until Grettir cuts off Glam's head"

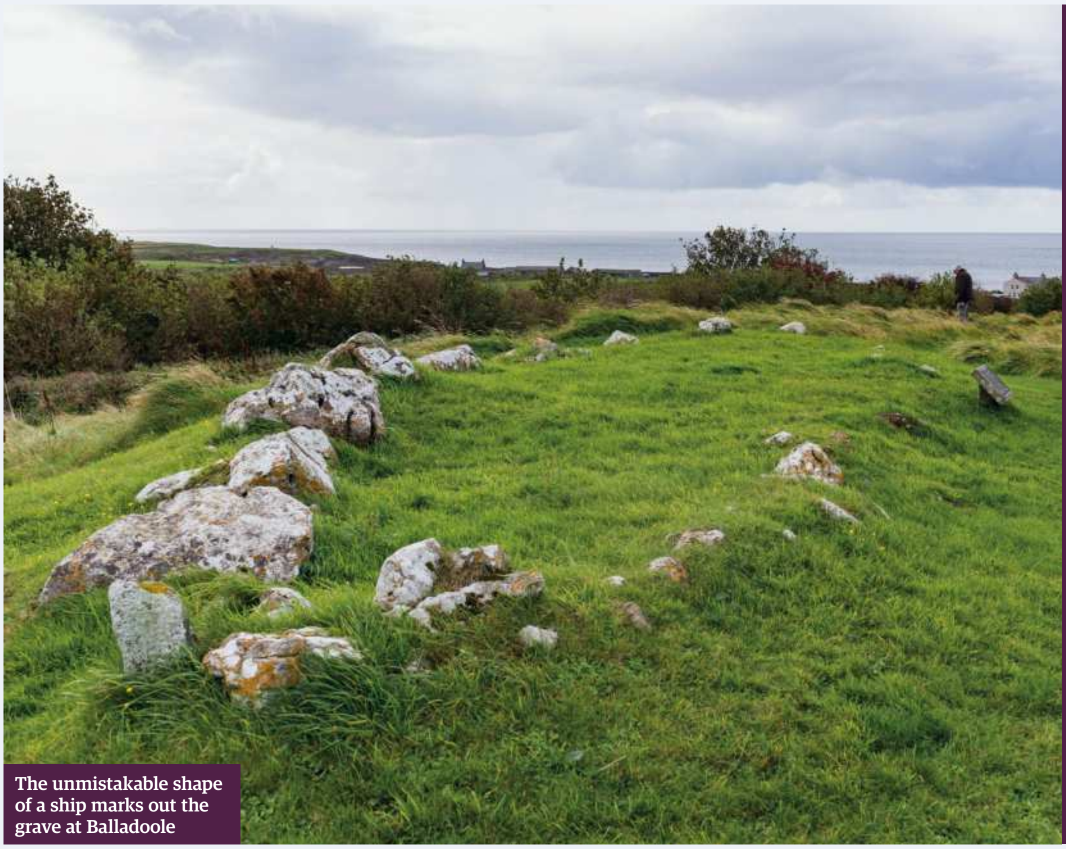
Ghosts And 'The Undead'

Some of the most remarkable Viking stories concern the dead, or perhaps to be more precise the undead. There are a number of accounts of ghosts which have a much more physical presence than the ethereal beings that we might think of them as in modern times (if we believe in them at all). Two main types of ghost appear in Viking literature; the haugbui and the draugr. Both are the reanimated corpses of people - not ethereal spirits but powerful supernatural beings in physical form who jealously guard their former possessions or terrorise their family or community.

The haugbui are harmless until their grave is disturbed and their burial mound (and grave goods) come under threat. The draugr, on the other hand, is naturally malevolent and would leave the mound to wreak havoc - murdering people, killing animals, and destroying property. One of the best-known stories of a draugr comes from the Icelandic *Grettir's Saga* (13th to 14th century CE). In this story, a farmer named Thorhall has trouble keeping servants on his property; they keep leaving, claiming his place is haunted. He finally hires a tall heathen named Glam who says he has no fear of spirits and proves as good as his word as he takes care of the sheep and other tasks.

But then one Christmas Day, Glam is found dead in the fields (apparently because he ate meat on a fast-day the evening before). He is too heavy for the people to move easily and, besides, they are now feasting so his body is left out for a few days. When he is finally buried there is not much ceremony involved because he was a heathen, but he does not stay buried for long. Soon after, Thorhall has more trouble than before keeping the hired help on his farm as Glam - now supernaturally tall and strong with skin 'blue as hell' - goes about killing the flocks, breaking objects and house-riding (bouncing up and down while sitting on the roof). One shepherd who agrees to work for Thorhall disappears and is found dead in the churchyard with his neck and all his bones broken. Another servant who has remained on the farm for years is found in the barn in similar condition and Thorhall's livestock is killed and eaten. News of Thorhall's problems with the ghost eventually reaches the saga's hero, Grettir Asmundson, who offers his services.

Grettir waits in the farmer's hall and, after a few nights, Glam appears. The hero and the draugr battle through the hall and then outdoors until Grettir cuts off Glam's head. Thorhall and Grettir then burn Glam's corpse, gather his ashes in the skin of a beast and bury what is left. Thorhall then tells his neighbours what has happened and where the ashes are buried so the spot can be avoided. Stories such as this one often emphasise the importance of proper funerary rites by warning of the very real danger of creating a draugr if rituals are not followed. If Glam had been buried properly, even though he was not of the Christian faith, he probably would have remained at rest. 'Doing things right' mattered to the Vikings in both pagan and Christian times, hence the importance of rituals from the beginning to the end of their era.



The unmistakable shape of a ship marks out the grave at Balladoole

Balladoole And Ballateare

Evidence of human sacrifice on the Isle of Man

Balladoole is the site of a Viking ship burial on the Isle of Man. It houses the remains of a 36-foot long Viking boat from between 850 and 950 CE and the vessel is of a type that would regularly have sailed around the Irish Sea at the time. Little of the ship itself was found with the timbers having rotted away, though a stone cairn that marked its outline remained. This is remarkable enough in its own right but has several additional features which are of interest. One is that it is built on the site of a Christian burial ground. Several Christian graves were disturbed by the ship burial and it is possible that this is a deliberate attempt to assert the dominance of the pagan gods over Christianity. Once more the remains of animals, this time cremated, were found along with the remains of a human who may well have been a sacrifice.

Another grave, at nearby Ballateare, contains more definite evidence of such a sacrifice. The grave included the remains of a young man from the Viking era who had been placed in a coffin that was covered with a coarsely woven cloth. He was buried with a sword which had been damaged, possibly deliberately in an attempt to ritually 'kill' the weapon. There was a young woman of similar age also interred and examination of her skull shows clear evidence of heavy trauma, suggesting a terrible end to this sacrificial victim's life.

Changing Attitudes to Death

How attitudes to death evolved over The Enlightenment

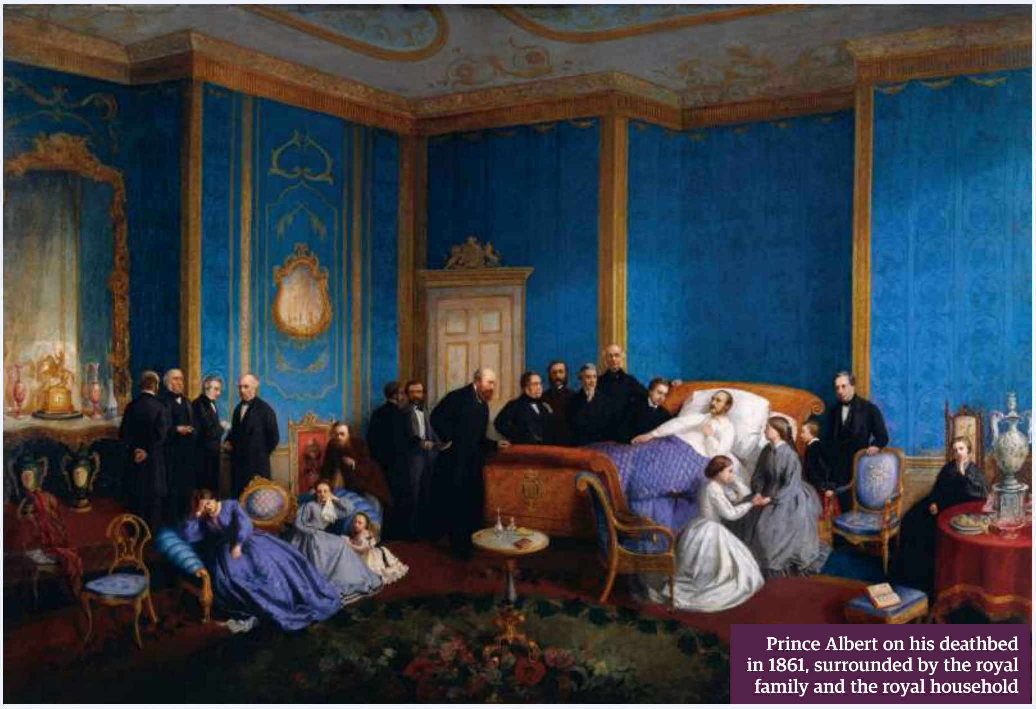
Written by Derek Wilson

Sex and Death. These are probably the two most dominant factors in the experience of most people. How we deal with them tells us a great deal about the society in which we live. For example, the Victorians turned death into a major spectacle. Burial rituals were lavish. Close relatives of the departed wore black - often for a long time. Queen Victoria assumed 'widow's weeds' after the death of her beloved husband, Prince Albert, in 1861 and never discarded them throughout the remaining 40 years of her reign. The 'memento mori' industry flourished. Strands of hair from deceased loved ones were preserved in lockets, rings and other items of jewellery.

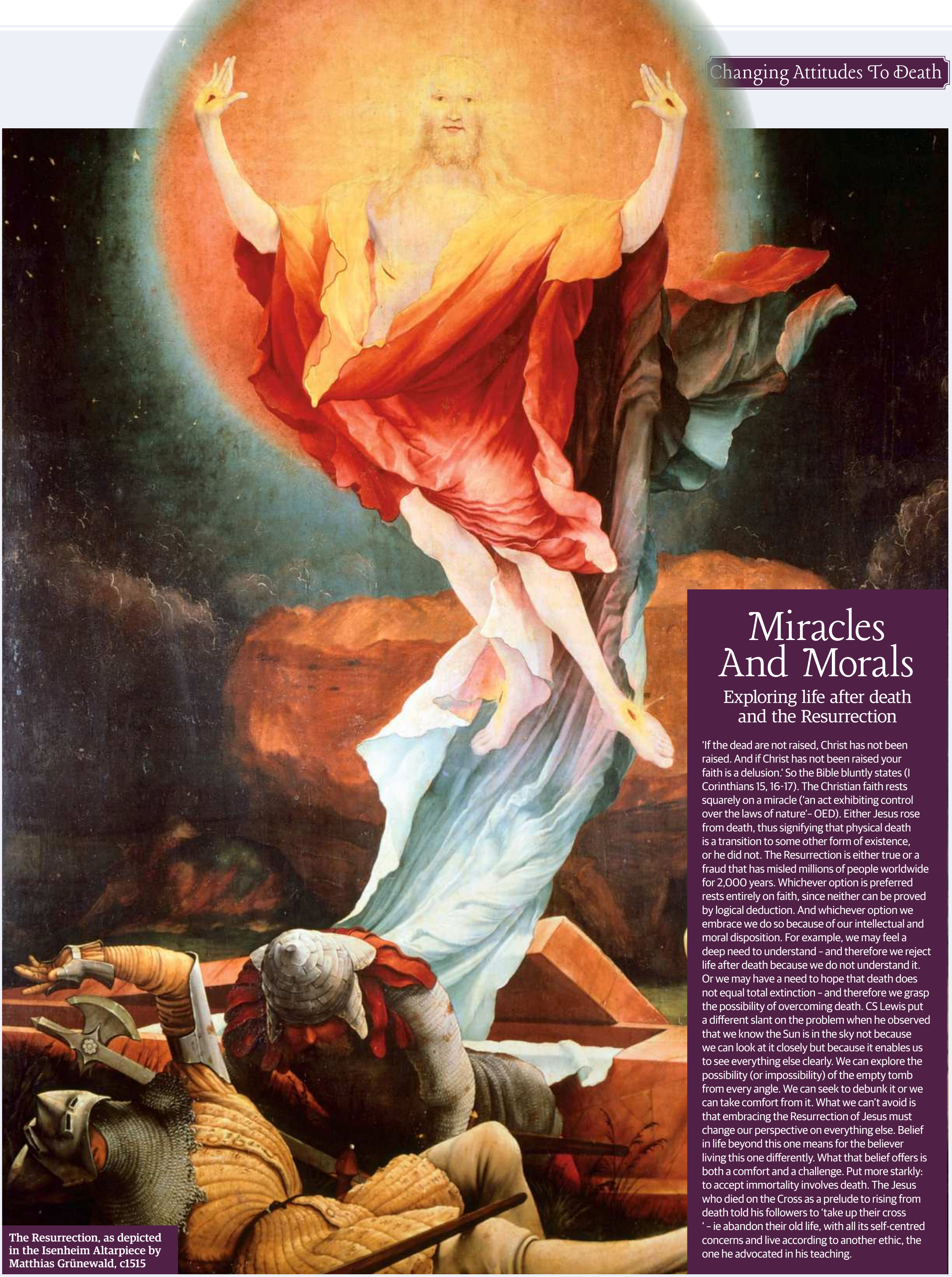
Sex, on the other hand, was treated in a very hush-hush manner. Children were brought up largely in ignorance of the reproductive functions of their bodies. The pleasures of physical intimacy were kept very much under wraps in prudish Victorian society. The results were predictable: hypocrisy, loveless marriages, an increase in prostitution, and repression erupting in scandals that often ruined lives.

Over 150 years later attitudes have been completely reversed. Funerals are, for the most part, brief affairs conducted at the local 'crem'. Elaborate gravestones and memorials are things of the past and talking about death is regarded as 'gruesome' - something that often makes it difficult for the bereaved to deal with their grief. Sex, on the other hand, enjoys the full glare of publicity. Books, films and TV dramas present sexual activity with ever increasing explicitness. Pornographic magazines are easily available. The 'facts of life' are taught in primary schools. Teenagers experiment. Oral contraceptives became readily available in the 1960s, supposedly to reduce the risk of unwanted pregnancies but, in fact, by encouraging 'free love', having the exact opposite effect. There have to be explanations for this dramatic reversal of attitudes but to discover them we must go back in time beyond the reign of Victoria Regina.

> "The Victorians turned death into a major spectacle with lavish burial rituals"


Prince Albert on his deathbed in 1861, surrounded by the royal family and the royal household

'Modern history' is usually thought of as beginning in the 16th century, when the movements we conveniently label 'Renaissance' and 'Reformation' became ideological driving forces, inspiring new ways of looking at old problems, and inventing new social structures for making European societies more robust. The process was chaotic, turbulent, painful and often destructive. A new generation of political, religious and intellectual leaders eagerly tore at the fabric of medieval society - much to the bewilderment and resentment of their traditionalist neighbours. The change involved two centuries of warfare, civil strife, persecution and broken relationships. And the change was never completed - in the sense of constructing a new world with the aid of a clear blueprint. Because the changes themselves changed, revolution - to those close to it - looked more like evolution. Yet revolution it most certainly was, and that of a fundamental nature.

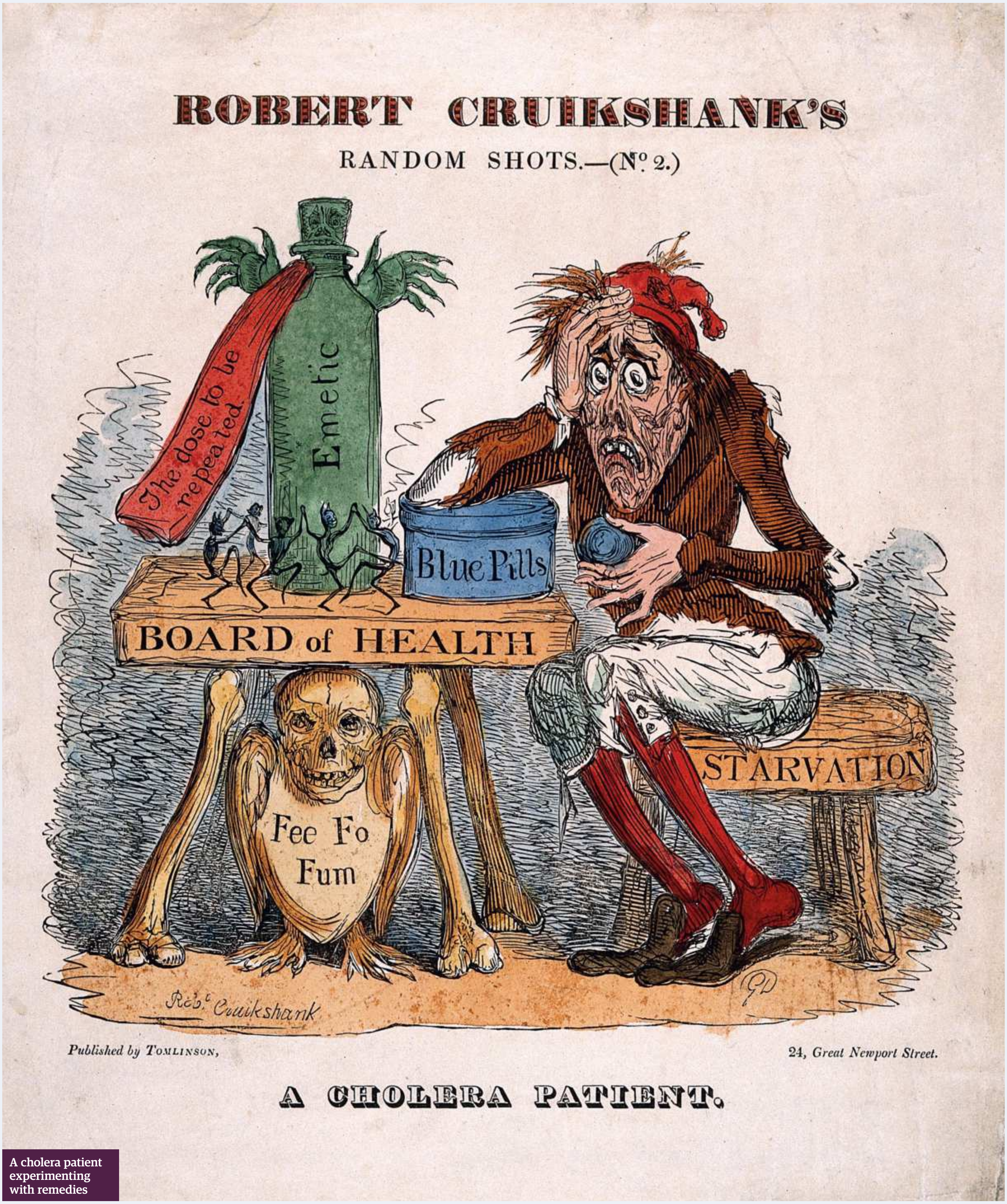


The Resurrection, as depicted in the Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald, c1515

Miracles And Morals

Exploring life after death and the Resurrection

'If the dead are not raised, Christ has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised your faith is a delusion.' So the Bible bluntly states (I Corinthians 15, 16-17). The Christian faith rests squarely on a miracle ('an act exhibiting control over the laws of nature'– OED). Either Jesus rose from death, thus signifying that physical death is a transition to some other form of existence, or he did not. The Resurrection is either true or a fraud that has misled millions of people worldwide for 2,000 years. Whichever option is preferred rests entirely on faith, since neither can be proved by logical deduction. And whichever option we embrace we do so because of our intellectual and moral disposition. For example, we may feel a deep need to understand – and therefore we reject life after death because we do not understand it. Or we may have a need to hope that death does not equal total extinction – and therefore we grasp the possibility of overcoming death. CS Lewis put a different slant on the problem when he observed that we know the Sun is in the sky not because we can look at it closely but because it enables us to see everything else clearly. We can explore the possibility (or impossibility) of the empty tomb from every angle. We can seek to debunk it or we can take comfort from it. What we can't avoid is that embracing the Resurrection of Jesus must change our perspective on everything else. Belief in life beyond this one means for the believer living this one differently. What that belief offers is both a comfort and a challenge. Put more starkly: to accept immortality involves death. The Jesus who died on the Cross as a prelude to rising from death told his followers to 'take up their cross ' – ie abandon their old life, with all its self-centred concerns and live according to another ethic, the one he advocated in his teaching.


ROBERT CRUIKSHANK'S
RANDOM SHOTS.—(No. 2.)
The dose to be repeated.
Emetic
Blue Pills
BOARD of HEALTH
STARVATION
Fee Fo Fum
Robt. Cruikshank
Published by Tomlinson,
24, Great Newport Street.
A CHOLERA PATIENT.

A cholera patient experimenting with remedies

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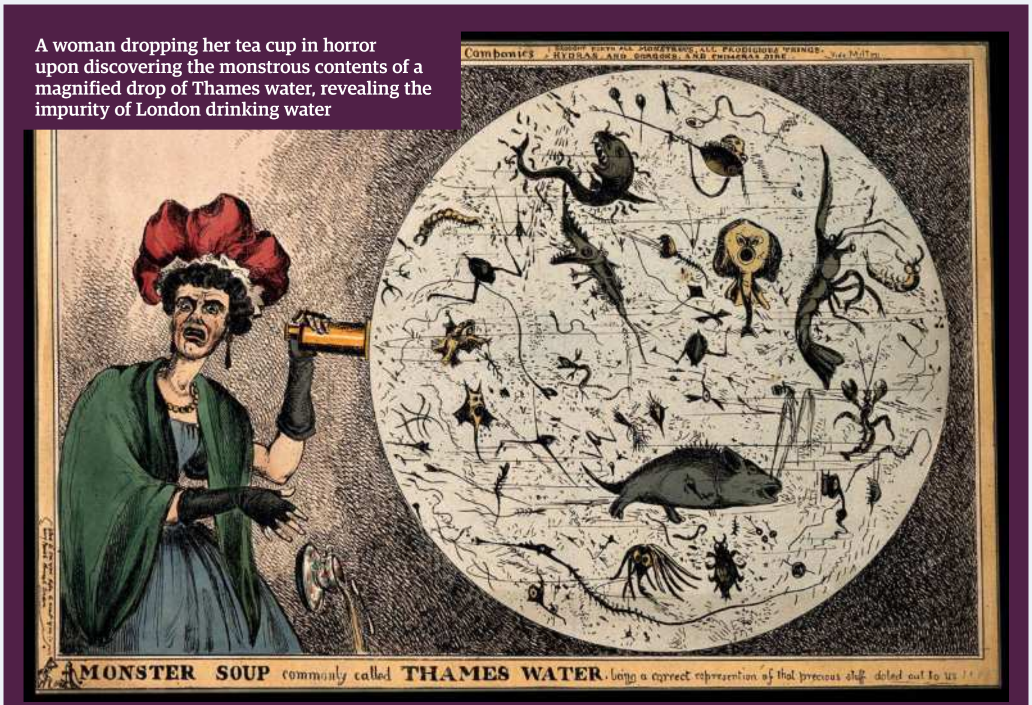
A woman dropping her tea cup in horror upon discovering the monstrous contents of a magnified drop of Thames water, revealing the impurity of London drinking water


Camponics
Brought forth all monstrous, all prodigious things,
Hydras and Gorgons, and Chimeras dire.
Vide Milton
MONSTER SOUP commonly called THAMES WATER, being a correct representation of that precious stuff doled out to us

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Cholera, Cancer And Covid

While science can help control the impact of plagues and pandemics, the resulting deaths have become an inevitable part of life

The steady – and often amazing – advances in medical science over the last 250 years have significantly lengthened life expectancy, at least in the world's more advanced countries. The current Covid crisis is a stark reminder of the pandemics our ancestors had to endure. In the 19th century the most feared pandemic was cholera. Various waves of the disease spread over the world, aided by the migrations of poor or persecuted people looking for a better life in Europe or North America. In London alone recurrences of the disease killed around 6,000 in 1832-33, 14,000 in 1848-49 and 10,000 in 1853-54.

Medical opinion insisted that the plague was vector-borne or transmitted through the air by 'miasmas'. The man who almost single-handedly revealed the real cause and, therefore, the way to prevent it was Dr John Snow who witnessed hundreds of fatalities in London. He deduced that the real cause was polluted water but, despite being one of the country's top physicians, his theory was rejected by the leaders of his profession. At that time sewage ended up in rivers and lakes because there were no sewers. In summer the stink from the Thames was appalling. When the 1853 outbreak occurred Snow set about a thorough analysis of the spread of the disease. He plotted each case on a map and this located the centre of the epidemic to be a public water pump in Broad Street. Still his critics were not convinced. Their only concession was to remove the pump handle to deter casual drinkers. Only when Snow pinpointed the origin of the infection in the washing of a baby's nappy at the pump was he taken seriously. It still took more years and more deaths before the necessary action was taken. A new sewage system for the capital was completed in 1875. Sadly, Snow did not live to see it. The moral to be drawn from such stories might be that science has the answer to all human ailments. Equally it could be suggested that the appearance of new pandemics and the persistence of killers like cancer should be a warning against hubris.

> "For many of leaders of the new age, God became an irrelevance"

The medieval world was a magical world – that is to say that the material was shot through with the spiritual, the temporal with the eternal, the finite with the infinite. It was not just simple country folk who believed that Oberon and his sprites occupied the dense forests that still covered much of Europe, that fairies were malign associates of Satan who delighted to smite cattle with disease; that it was advisable to stay on the right side of the local wise-woman who had the power to cast spells on those who displeased her; that necromancers could commune with the dead and by this means uncover secrets, such as the location of buried treasure; that every time the parish priest performed mass, he turned consecrated bread and wine into the actual flesh and blood of Christ; that every person's destiny was influenced by the movements of the heavenly bodies and that astrologers could read a client's destiny by casting his/her horoscope. In short, few people questioned Hamlet's assertion, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, that are dreamt of in your philosophy" (ie than can ever be discovered through scholarly debate or scientific enquiry.)

It is very easy to read Hamlet's remarks in terms of the conflict between science and superstition. In terms of the play this is too simplistic. The prince has just seen the ghost of his father, the late king, which has come from purgatory to reveal that he was murdered by his brother. So, in these few words we find reference to (a) a supernatural visitation, (b) the standard doctrine of the Church regarding the afterlife, (c) the scepticism of philosophers which is rejected by Hamlet as inadequate in probing the mysteries of whatever may lie beyond death.

In the ensuing decades, and with increasing rapidity, intellectuals turned their back on existing authorities and the politico-religious convictions that sustained them. There were two predominating reasons for what came to be called the 'Enlightenment'. One was the appalling devastation of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). What confidence, philosophers asked, could be reposed in systems of belief that had led to death and destruction in Europe on an unprecedented scale?

The other was scientific advance. A generation of brilliant thinkers such as Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, Gottfried Leibniz and the founders of scientific clubs like the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge resulted in enormous strides being made in a variety of scientific disciplines. Pioneers of the 17th and 18th centuries established that problems as diverse as the workings of the Solar System and the conquest of disease could be solved by logic and experimentation. And, if disciplined thought led to understanding of the material universe, why should it not enable human societies to better regulate their political lives? 'Enlightened' humanity could solve its own problems without recourse to tradition or spiritual authority. Man could study the material world and answer all the 'how' questions. It was only a short step to believing that the 'why' questions that had always engaged people's minds were unnecessary. For many of leaders of the new age, God became an irrelevance.

The scholarly debates of this period have often been presented as a conflict between science and religion (or superstition as some combatants preferred to call it). This is a gross simplification. While some Enlightenment philosophers were atheists, others are better described as sceptics, men determined to subject 'Christian truth' to rational scrutiny and present a rationalised version of the ancient faith, stripped of all errors. Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781) went so far as to 'rewrite' the New Testament, and present Jesus as a failed political and religious leader whose teaching, though admirable, was too radical and led to his death. It was his disciples who invented the story of his resurrection, Lessing claimed. Voltaire (1694-1778) had no issue with the Bible story but was contemptuous of the Church for distorting it. Another Frenchman, Denis Diderot, made a major contribution to the Enlightenment movement by his publication of the monumental *Encyclopedia*, or a *Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts and*

Crafts. As its title suggested, this aimed to inform readers about everything worth study.

Edmund Burke (1729-1797) used the tools of the new philosophy to actually debunk atheism and he attacked those Enlightenment thinkers who were cheering on the French Revolution and seeking to undermine the religious establishment. These are just some indications that what we call the 'Enlightenment' was a harlequin radical movement. Its only unifying belief was that a new, better society could be achieved by the unaided application of reason. Unfortunately, the assertions of Enlightenment thinkers proved no more able to deliver a better society than those of the religious and political guides who had preceded them. The French Revolution gave rise to political chaos which spilled across Europe and led, ultimately to the emergence of a dictator with grandiose imperial ambitions - Napoléon Bonaparte. Moreover, scientific rationalism simply could not stop people asking the 'why' questions - 'Why are we here?' and 'What happens when we die?'

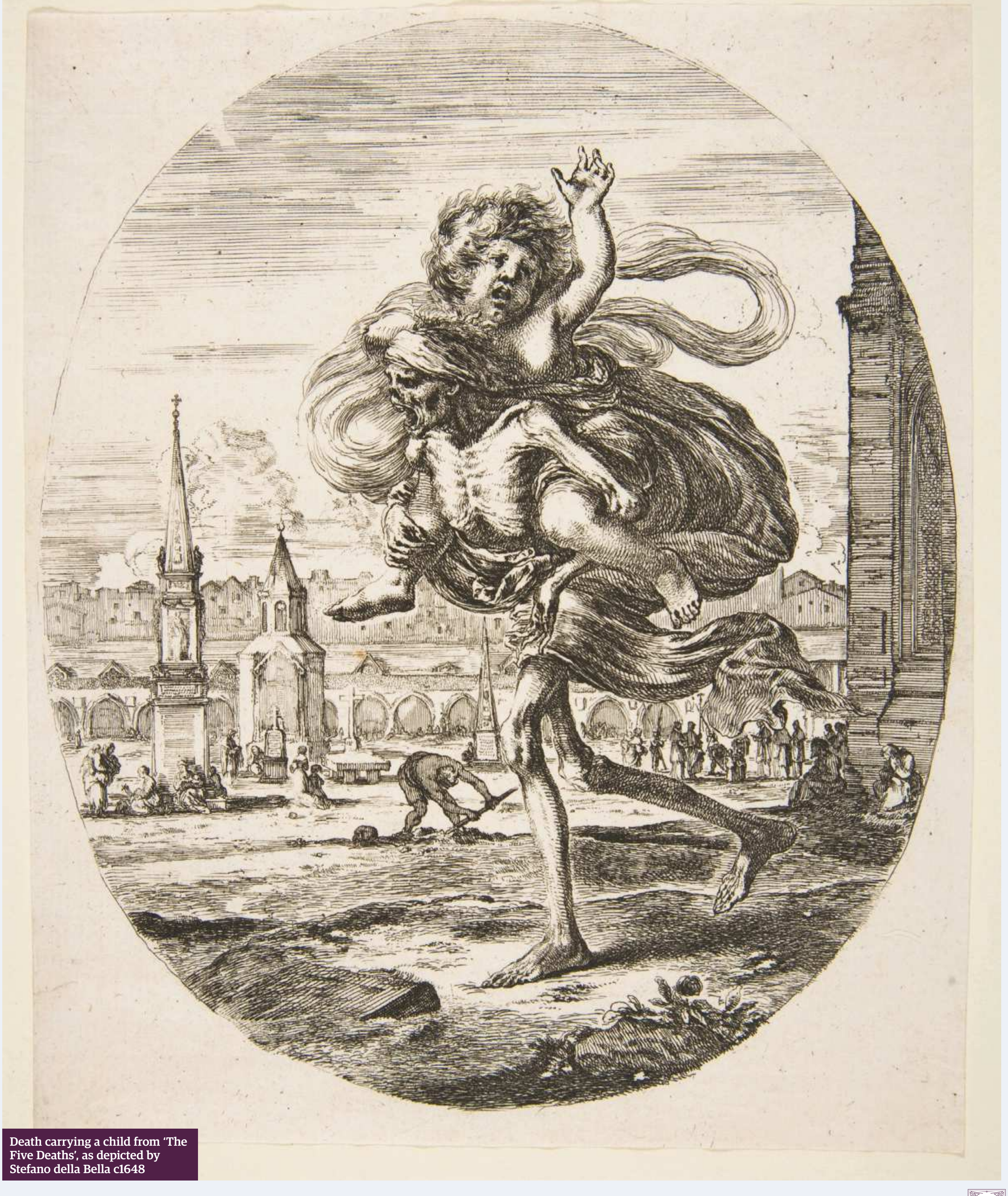
These questions were being tackled by another contemporary movement - religious revivalism. John Wesley, George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards were the major peaks in a mountain range of preachers who made a profound impact on both sides of the Atlantic. Some employed highly emotional hortatory styles to move their hearers. A pejorative word now coined to describe this activity was 'Enthusiasm'. However, there were those who deplored emotionalism and were much closer to Enlightenment thinkers in their desire to bring intellectual discipline to the understanding and application of Christian faith. Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was particularly outspoken in his denunciation of Enthusiasm. He and those who thought like him were part of a movement that came to be known as 'Evangelicalism'. They, in fact embraced Enlightenment principles (or, it would be truer to say that both movements shared dissatisfaction with prevailing religious trends), such as the need to buttress their teaching with convincing logical argument and to apply the theory of Christian love to the practical reform of society - care for the poor and the improvement of political systems.

There was need for such activity. Europe and the recently fledged USA were in the grip of industrialisation. Populations were shifting to the growing cities where men, women and even children were cramming into mines, mills and factories - a new urban underclass, more prone than their forebears to death from disease or accident. Frequent cholera pandemics, for example, had devastating effects. Half a million perished in France, Britain and North America in one outbreak alone during 1853-54. Nothing pointed up the increasing gap between 'haves' and 'have-nots' than the different death rituals. While thousands were shuffled into unmarked paupers graves, members of the industrial nouveau-riche were seen on their way in lavish funerals, their resting places marked by exuberant memorials. Funeral parks were established, such as Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland, California, where the best site - Millionaire's Row - became an architectural extravaganza of ornate mausoleums. The class divide outlived death itself. But social inequality did not go unchallenged. Social political reform movements were fed by and gradually changed the structure of society. They were supported by men and women of goodwill but it was Evangelicalism that provided the theological blueprint for the increase of public charity. So much so that the 1900s in Britain and America have often been referred to as the 'Evangelical Century'.

While philanthropy was widely admired and practised by people of all religions and none, the

> "While thousands were shuffled into unmarked graves, the nouveau-riche were seen on their way in lavish funerals"

Witches' Sabbath, Allegory of Vice, painted by Claes Jacobsz van der Heck, c1636



Death carrying a child from 'The Five Deaths', as depicted by Stefano della Bella c1648

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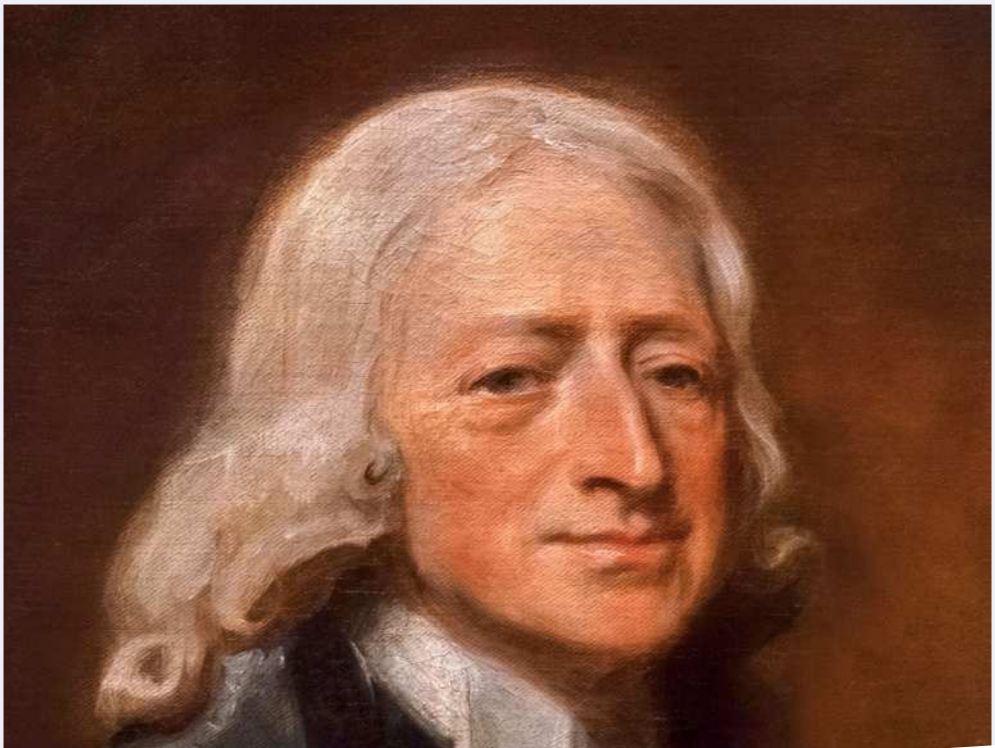
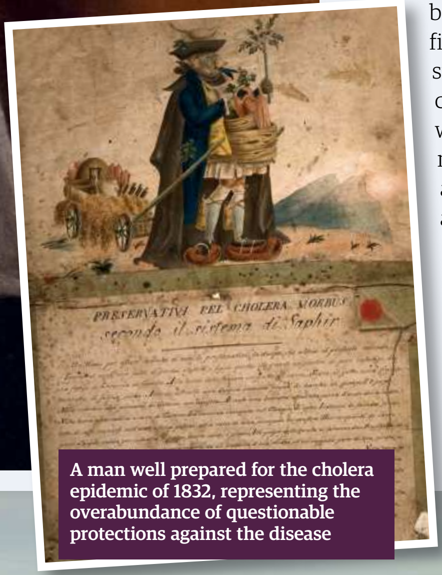


John Wesley was particularly enthusiastic in his denunciation of Enthusiasm

biblical basis for it had much to do with beliefs regarding resurrection and judgement. In place of the Catholic dogma of purgatory, a state in which departed souls were gradually cleansed of their unforgiven sins, the Evangelical teaching adhered to the New Testament doctrine of the 'general resurrection'. This stated that at the 'end time' when Christ returns everyone who has ever died will rise bodily, with their original physical shape reconstituted, in order to 'meet him in the air'. Then each will face divine judgement. Those who have honoured and served him in this life will be with him for all eternity in a 'new heaven and a new earth'. There was not, and is not, total agreement in Protestant circles about the precise timetable or what we might, perhaps, call the 'divine chemistry' of this transformation, but the common factor of all versions of the biblical message is an endorsement of irreversible fate. The blessed will 'glorify God and enjoy him forever' (Westminster Shorter Catechism, 1647). The remainder will be exiled from God's presence. Various vivid metaphors are used in the Bible to describe the horror of this 'hell', the commonest being fire or darkness but they are only figurative images to describe a spiritual state. In the second half of the 19th century church attendance in the Christian West was high and it is reasonable to suppose that most attendees had some understanding along these lines of what awaited them after death.

To be sure of being on the right side in the next world was, as has been suggested, bound up with living virtuously in this one. Reform movements to improve the lot of the poor covered many aspects of working-class life such as housing, working



A man well prepared for the cholera epidemic of 1832, representing the overabundance of questionable protections against the disease

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Rows upon rows of gravestones at the Tyne Cot cemetery in Belgium provide a timeless reminder of the cost of war conditions and education. These, combined with the rising aspirations of the lower orders, worked towards transforming society politically. Franchise reform, the rise of socialism, longer life and better health due to medical discoveries narrowed the gaps in the social fabric. From the 1870s democracy gnawed away at the power of the rich, enabling all adult males and eventually women to have a share in government. One result was the weakening of commitment to the Church. In some places the desertion was quite dramatic. In London by 1902 only 19 per cent of the population attended Sunday worship. Ironically, the improvements in living conditions to which religion had largely contributed also served to undermine belief. Reform smacked of paternalism and a class growing in self-confidence was turning its back on its forelock-tugging past. Another ingredient to social change was the re-emergence of scientific challenge. In 1859 Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* to demonstrate how all living organisms, including man, evolved. Apart from the overreactions of a few ecclesiastics this challenge to the literal reading of Genesis did not seriously rattle very many scholarly dovecots but it did make an impression on the general public unable to follow the intricacies of philosophical/theological debate. It provided another stick with which to belabour official religion.

So, if commitment to Christianity was so fragile, what did most semi-educated people believe? A large part of the answer seems to lie in a subcutaneous folk religion. Speculation about invisible heavens and hells were of less concern than the practicalities of everyday living - and they, it was generally believed, were influenced by 'lucky' charms, superstitions about black cats and the number 13. Witchcraft certainly survived well into the 20th century. When it came to the fate of the dear departed most people, it seems, were content to believe good and kind people 'went to heaven', that a loving God would not ask too many questions, and that their grannies were still looking down on them.

And yet the old order would not have melted away as rapidly as it eventually did, had it not been for World War I. The battlefield carnage, particularly on the Western Front, was on such an unprecedented scale that it scarred the public mind for generations. The loss of life was on such a scale that repatriation of bodies became an impossibility. As a result many cemeteries were established on or adjacent to the places where troops had died. The rows upon rows of simple crosses provide a timeless reminder of the cost of war. In more immediate terms the death toll had a lasting effect on the structure of society.

"The battlefield carnage was on such an unprecedented scale that it scarred the public mind for generations"

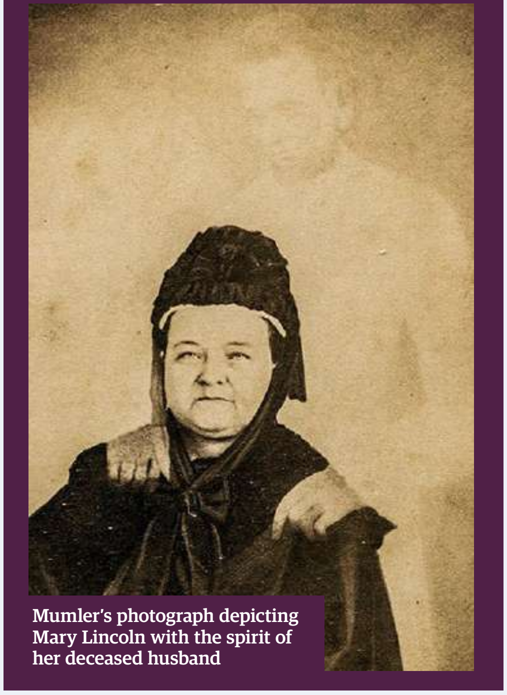
Among the fallen were many heirs of grand estates and thriving businesses. Aristocratic dynasties disappeared. Historic mansions were abandoned. Land taxes to pay for the war played their part in social levelling. World War I did not turn out to be 'the war to end all wars' but it did change the way a whole generation thought about death. And 1939-1945 erected more barriers between old certainties and the real world.

Is There Anybody There?

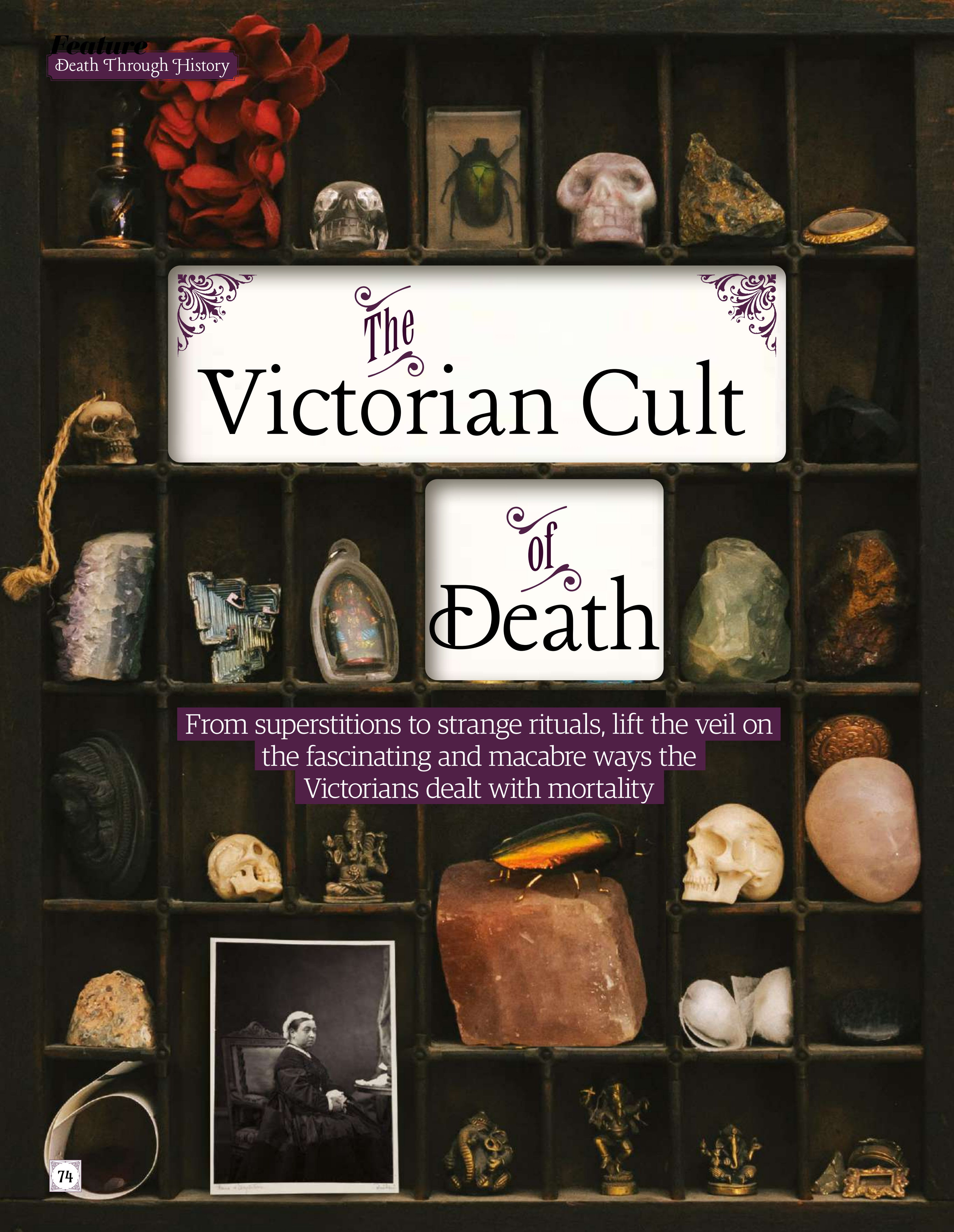
Spiritualism offers hope that the spirits of the dead exist and can communicate with the living

In 1872 William Mumler, an American photographer, captured on film a portrait of Abraham Lincoln and his wife. It was a moving image and remarkable because the president had been dead for seven years. Mumler had mastered the art of 'spirit photography'. It was achieved by superimposing two images on one negative – not a very sophisticated trick but one that easily fooled victims who knew little about the latest technology. There were many such gullible people about in the aftermath of the American Civil War. Casualties among the troops on both sides totalled around 700,000. Inevitably, many bereaved Americans could not cope with their grief and were easy prey for men such as Mumler, who brought comforting assurance that the departed were waiting for them on the 'other side'. Other (perhaps all) major conflicts tend to encourage belief in the survival of spirits who can be reached by their living relatives. World War I saw a marked surge of belief in spiritualism.

Spirit photographers laid no claim to supernatural powers but there were those who did. Clairvoyants, psychic mediums and spirit guides believed themselves to possess the gift of being able to communicate with the dead. They stood in a long tradition that reached right back into Old Testament times. In the First Book of Samuel (28, 3-19) King Saul is described as having the Witch of Endor summon the spirit of the prophet in order to learn the result of the morrow's battle. The story did not end well; the ghost foretold the death of the king and his sons. It is likely that all human societies have had such seers, because the desire for hidden knowledge and for communion with those who have passed 'beyond the veil' is common among all people at all times. Queen Elizabeth I employed the services of John Dee, a magus, supposedly proficient in summoning the dead. The Spiritualist Church began in early 19th-century California and spread rapidly around the globe. The basic philosophy aims to bring peace of mind, inner harmony and even physical healing to adherents by connecting them with the collective consciousness existing on the spiritual plain. Death is not the end they insist. We are not left to struggle on our own. There is someone there.



Mumler's photograph depicting Mary Lincoln with the spirit of her deceased husband



The Victorian Cult of Death

From superstitions to strange rituals, lift the veil on the fascinating and macabre ways the Victorians dealt with mortality

From taking photographs of dead relatives to opening shops selling mourning clothes, the Victorians commercialised death. This was an era of industry, with hard work being seen as the creator of fortunes. By the end of the century, there would be compulsory schooling in Britain, better literacy levels, and scientific and medical progress across the Western world. Yet at the same time, the gap between rich and poor was enormous, and poverty levels, economic depression and high mortality rates meant that many were acutely aware of the inevitability of death.

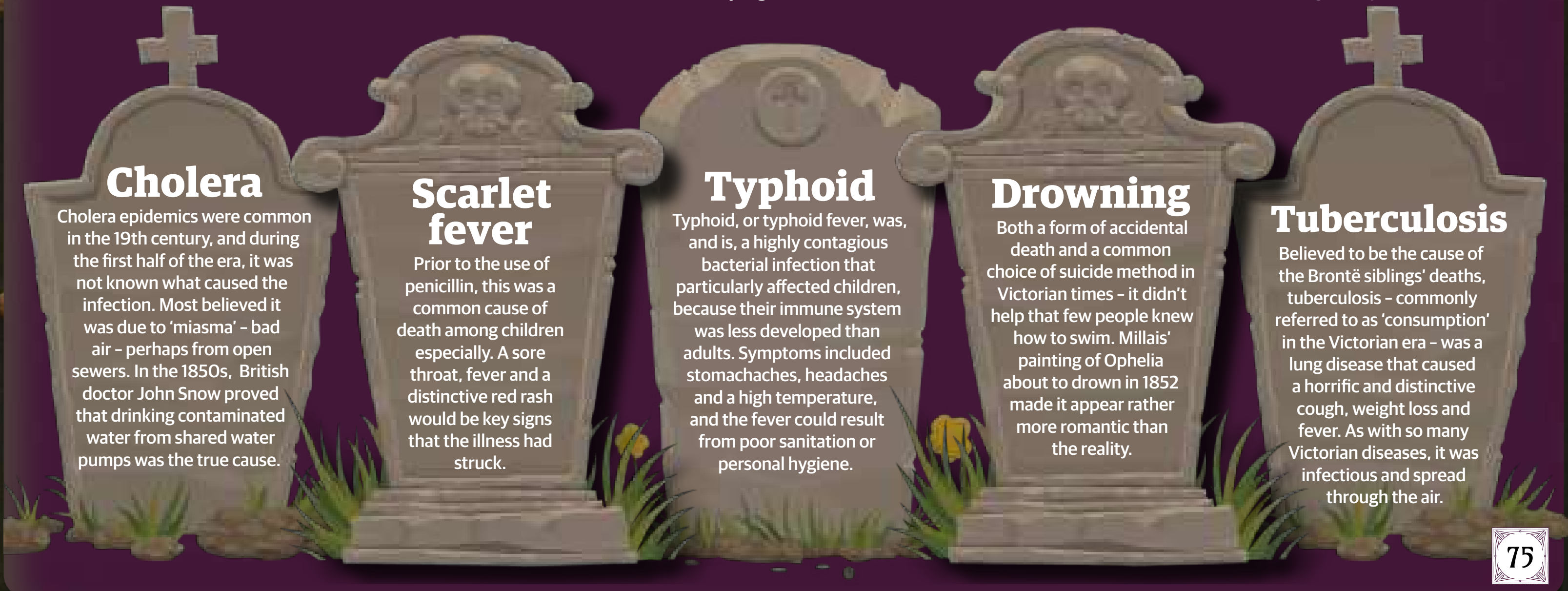
This was heightened by the growth of newspapers, which covered catastrophic events such as the Great Famine in 1840s Ireland, and the deaths of the famous, the rich, and even the poor. In addition, reporters showed little restraint when writing about the horrendous living conditions of the urban poor in grisly detail.

You could not avoid death, either in reality or the media. Both in Britain and the USA, the press detailed strange, unpleasant demises, and the post-mortems that followed them. The Victorian era also saw the creation of illustrated newspapers that depicted corpses in dramatic situations, all to titillate readers. Given the prevalence of loss in everyday life, it is perhaps only natural the Victorians tried to understand it by writing and reading about the subject, and even by shopping for the occasion.

Common Killers

Death lurked around every corner, but these were the most likely culprits

Disease was rife in the Victorian era, and illnesses we shake off today could kill a century ago. Alongside these common causes of death were suicides – the result of mental maladies or financial worries – and accidental deaths, caused by industrial accidents or other workplace incidents in days before health and safety regulations. Children were killed when their clothes caught flame from nearby candles, or when they were scalded with hot water from kettles. The Victorian world was, in short, a dangerous place to live.



Cholera

Cholera epidemics were common in the 19th century, and during the first half of the era, it was not known what caused the infection. Most believed it was due to 'miasma' – bad air – perhaps from open sewers. In the 1850s, British doctor John Snow proved that drinking contaminated water from shared water pumps was the true cause.

Scarlet fever

Prior to the use of penicillin, this was a common cause of death among children especially. A sore throat, fever and a distinctive red rash would be key signs that the illness had struck.

Typhoid

Typhoid, or typhoid fever, was, and is, a highly contagious bacterial infection that particularly affected children, because their immune system was less developed than adults. Symptoms included stomachaches, headaches and a high temperature, and the fever could result from poor sanitation or personal hygiene.

Drowning

Both a form of accidental death and a common choice of suicide method in Victorian times – it didn't help that few people knew how to swim. Millais' painting of Ophelia about to drown in 1852 made it appear rather more romantic than the reality.

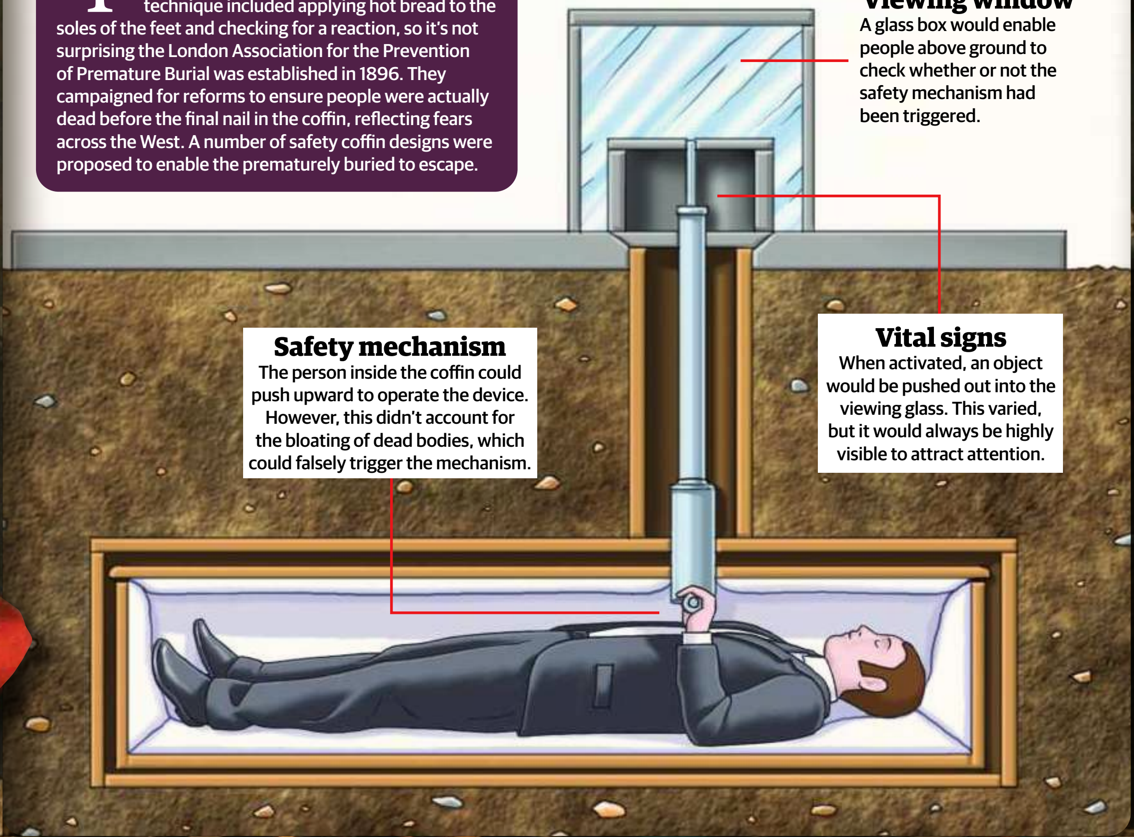
Tuberculosis

Believed to be the cause of the Brontë siblings' deaths, tuberculosis – commonly referred to as 'consumption' in the Victorian era – was a lung disease that caused a horrific and distinctive cough, weight loss and fever. As with so many Victorian diseases, it was infectious and spread through the air.

The Waking Dead

Fears of being buried alive led to some ingenious coffin contraptions

The inaccuracies of medical practices meant there was a real risk of a premature burial in the 19th century. To determine death, one technique included applying hot bread to the soles of the feet and checking for a reaction, so it's not surprising the London Association for the Prevention of Premature Burial was established in 1896. They campaigned for reforms to ensure people were actually dead before the final nail in the coffin, reflecting fears across the West. A number of safety coffin designs were proposed to enable the prematurely buried to escape.



Viewing window
A glass box would enable people above ground to check whether or not the safety mechanism had been triggered.

Safety mechanism
The person inside the coffin could push upward to operate the device. However, this didn't account for the bloating of dead bodies, which could falsely trigger the mechanism.

Vital signs
When activated, an object would be pushed out into the viewing glass. This varied, but it would always be highly visible to attract attention.

Dying to Look Good

The deceased had to go through a range of procedures to prepare for their big day

Victorian rituals started the second someone died. In the USA, curtains were drawn and clocks stopped at the time of the deceased's death. The house where they had lived would be decorated in black crape, with a wreath hung on the front door. Flowers and candles were placed around the house – not for ambience, but to mask the smell of a decomposing body, lying in state. Corpses were commonly kept at home for around four days, although the duration decreased during the Victorian era.

Photographs of family members might also be placed facedown to protect the people in them from being possessed by the dead person's spirit. In Germany, a woman known as a 'leichenfrau' (corpse bride) would tend to a body, washing and clothing it. Elsewhere, household servants or female family members would take on this role. It was important that the body looked presentable, as people would come to the house to view the dead – a custom that often involved giving visitors food and drink.

When mortuaries were established for bodies to lie in until being interred, cadavers would be watched by attendants, dressed suitably in black, as a means of reassuring the grieving relatives that their loved one was being treated in a dignified way. The attendants were often women, perhaps because of their perceived 'caring' temperament.

Both in Europe and across the Atlantic, bodies would be carried out of the house feet first, to prevent the dead's spirit from making his relatives follow him. The funeral, however, was a largely male event. In the first half of the century, upper-class women would not have gone to funerals, although they might have decorated the coffin prior to the event with flowers, or cut the dead's hair to put into lockets, brooches or rings. Even Queen Victoria did not attend the funeral of her beloved husband, Prince Albert.

Victorian death was highly ritualised, from the laying out of bodies to the horse-drawn funeral procession

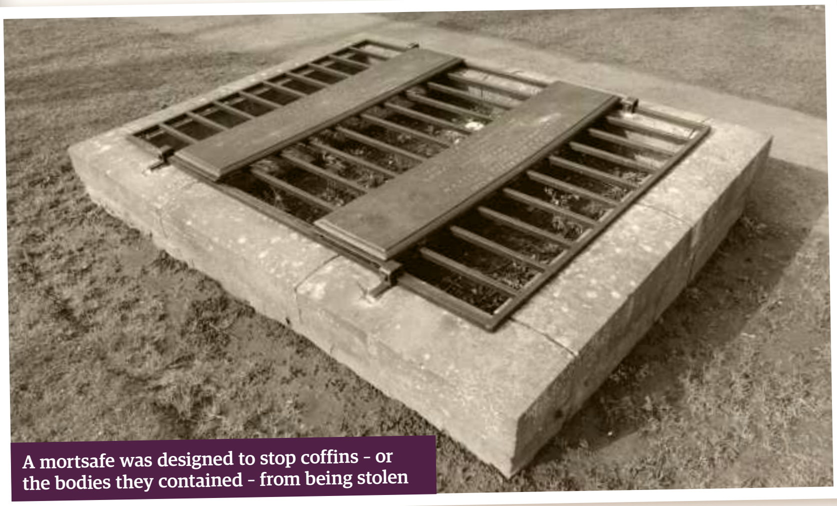
Beware The Body Snatchers

The extravagance involved in many death-related rituals was at odds with the rather grave matter of stealing corpses

The Victorians spent as much money as they were able to on saying goodbye to the dead, and to preserving their memories. The wealthiest would opt for a grand mausoleum, while those who were less well-off might instead commission a gravestone or memorial for their loved ones. Sculptures of angels were particularly popular, signifying a guide to heaven, and sleeping children, flowers and doves, were inscribed onto headstones as well. This desire to establish something permanent was all the more poignant given the fears of grave robbing.

The body snatchers were prominent in early-19th-century Britain, but also in the US, and made money from selling fresh cadavers to medical schools. Prior to the Victorian period, anatomy students would use criminals who had been hanged. However, as the numbers of students increased, the shortage of bodies led to rather entrepreneurial individuals digging up corpses. This caused such panic that a deceased's family and friends would watch over a body until it was buried, and iron coffins were used along with mortsafes – iron bars to protect the coffin – to prevent bodies being dug up. People even drew up wills requesting they be buried in a strong coffin.

In the UK, the 1832 Anatomy Act enabled unclaimed bodies and those donated by relatives to be used for science, effectively ending the trade in corpses. However, in the USA, this sinister business continued until the late-19th century, as more medical schools were established, and in 1878, a US congressman's body was snatched by Ohio Medical College students. But even if body snatching was becoming less common as the Victorian period progressed, the fear of it remained, along with the practice of creating a lasting memorial to a loved one.

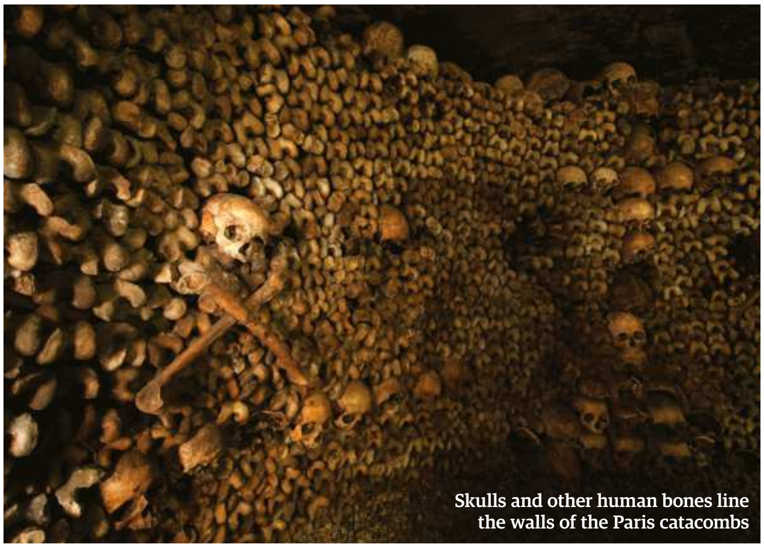


A mortsafe was designed to stop coffins – or the bodies they contained – from being stolen

Tunnels of Death

Dark chambers beneath Paris keep the remains of 6 million people

Deep beneath the heart of Paris, just south of the former city gate appropriately named the Gate of Hell, are the city catacombs. Beginning in the 1780s, the remains of more than 6 million people have gradually been moved here. The distinctive stacking of skulls that visitors can see today is a result of the renovations that took place in the early-19th century, when the cemeteries were overflowing. Remains were moved to Paris's former quarries, and skulls and bones were stacked from floor to ceiling. There were even separate rooms to display skeletal deformities and monumental tablets. From 1850, the catacombs opened to the public four times a year, and as interest grew, this was eventually increased to daily visits in the 1900s and has remained a macabre attraction ever since.

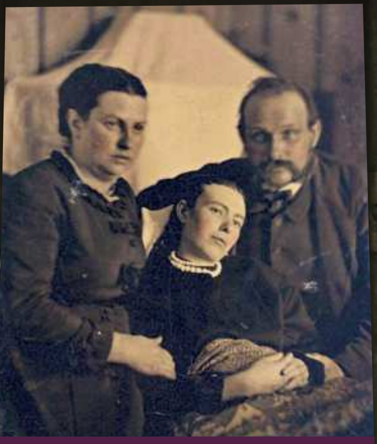


Skulls and other human bones line the walls of the Paris catacombs

20 metres
The depth is equivalent to a five-storey building

800 metres
The length of the galleries in the ossuary

14°c
The constant temperature in the catacombs



This couple were photographed with their deceased daughter, as a reminder of her

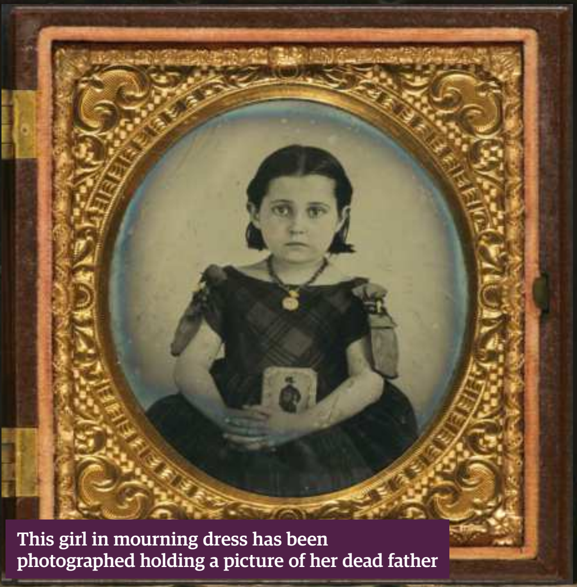
Mourning Rituals

From dress to funeral etiquette, the Victorians had strict rules on how to deal with death

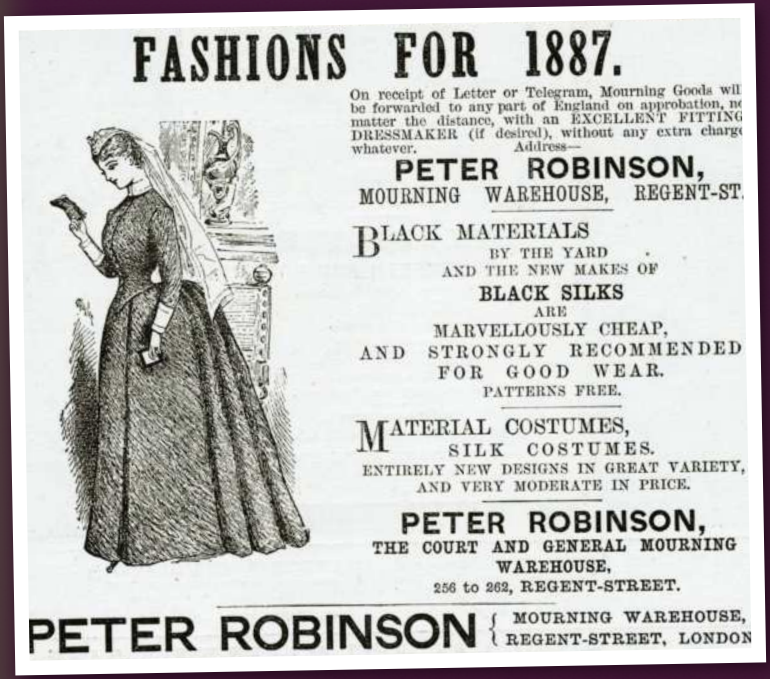
Queen Victoria was a deeply unpopular queen for many years after the death of Prince Albert. It was felt she had gone overboard with mourning for her much-loved husband, wearing widow's weeds for longer than was traditional and hiding herself away. For there were rules and expectations surrounding how Victorians should deal with death and its attendant rituals. Even what they wore was subject to detailed procedures - so much so that household manuals advised readers as to what was appropriate and how long a particular outfit should be worn. Initially, women wore deepest mourning clothes that were black and made of silk, bombazine or crepe. Then, gradually, the colours could lighten, becoming grey or mauve. The length of time they wore mourning clothes depended on who died - a husband required two years' mourning, while a cousin required one month.

With mourning clothes required, so too were shops specialising in such outfits. This was especially so, as the superstitious Victorians saw it as unlucky to store mourning outfits at home 'between uses' and so disposed of their clothes once the period of mourning had ended, buying new outfits each time someone died. Black-edged stationery was also required, and when the deceased's family wished to signal that they were ready to socialise again, they were supposed to leave cards with their friends - if they didn't, these friends would leave them alone, to respect their privacy. If cards were left for them to inquire as to their well-being, they were expected to send cards back with "thanks for kind inquiries" written on them. As with many Victorian customs, it was all about one's social appearance, and one magazine noted that "established customs" should be adhered to simply to avoid "shocking" society and appearing "heartless".

> "The superstitious Victorians saw it as unlucky to store mourning outfits at home between uses"



This girl in mourning dress has been photographed holding a picture of her dead father



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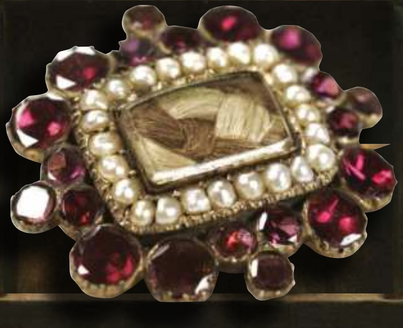
Memento Mori

These artistic reminders of mortality were prized by Victorians

Memento mori - meaning 'remember you will die' - were, in Victorian times, physical reminders of mortality, and could take various forms. Watches decorated with phrases relating to death, rings featuring locks of hair from deceased loved ones, brooches featuring skull designs or images - items such as these were used to both remember the dead and to remind the living that they would follow suit. At the most disturbing level to modern minds, the Victorians also took post-mortem photographs of the dearly departed, often posed with their surviving relatives. Due to the cost, this would sometimes be the only photograph ever taken of an individual.



A Victorian mourning brooch often contained the hair of a deceased relative

Speaking to The Dead

How creative con artists became the talk of Victorian society

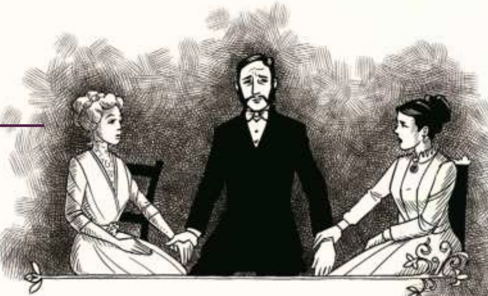
Spiritualism - the belief that ghosts exist and we can communicate with them - came into being as a movement in 1848 via three American sisters: Leah, Margaret and Kate Fox. The trio hit the headlines with a sensational (and totally bogus) ghost story in which they said they had communicated with the spirit haunting their home using a series of knocks - one for 'yes', two for 'no'. Rumours soon spread that the spirit belonged to a murdered peddler whose body was hidden in the cellar. The women were quickly promoted as mediums, making a fortune by holding crowded séances where they would contact the deceased at the audience's command.

With this business model behind them, mediums began to spring up all over the USA and then in Britain, holding intimate gatherings in darkened homes or more outlandish spectacles in music halls and theatres - for a fee.

Some might have been well-intentioned, genuinely convinced they could contact the dead, but most were frauds, using dim gaslight, sleight of hand and ingenious contraptions to hoodwink the vulnerable. Sadly, many were only too willing to believe. With technology advancing at an unbelievable pace, anything seemed possible. If they could send messages between continents via cables, then why couldn't they communicate with the afterlife?

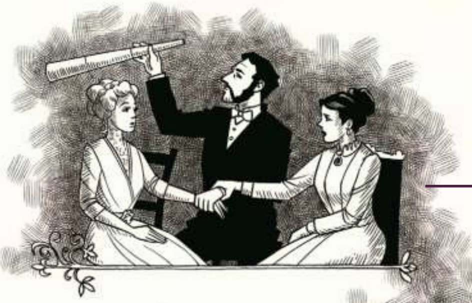
Take my hand

The lights are turned down or put out completely and the medium invites the participants to hold hands, or hold the wrist of the person to their left or right, to prove there's no foul play.



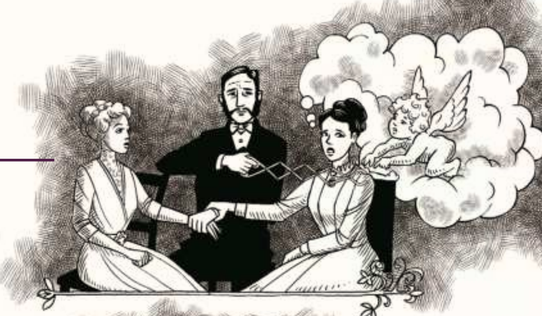
The spirits arrive

Pretending to enter a trance to communicate with the spirits, the medium twitches and jerks one hand loose. Scrambling for it in the dark, the participants either side don't realise they've been tricked into taking the same hand.



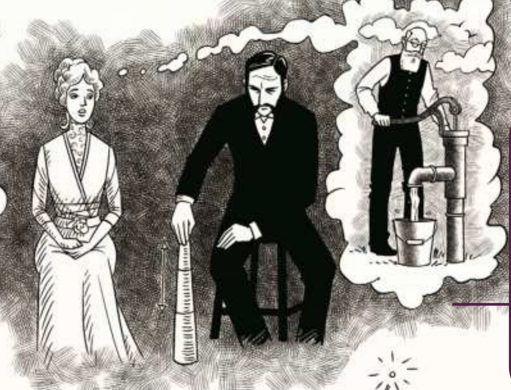
The spirits reach out

Using either their own hand, a waxwork replacement, a stuffed glove or a telescopic rod to reach across the table, the medium can now pretend a spirit is touching the audience.



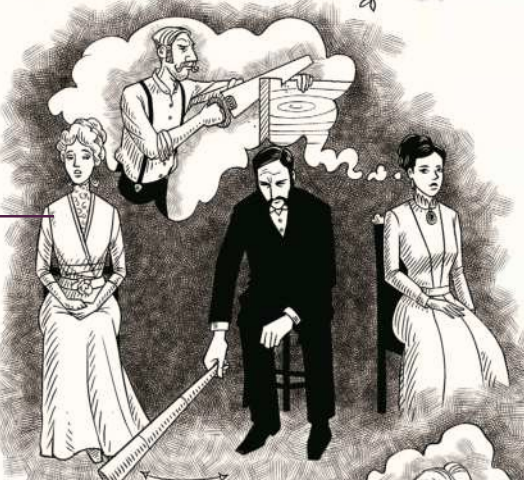
Ghostly wheezing

One account from 1925 detailed a ghostly farmer being summoned from the grave. The sound of him pumping water was produced by a collapsible trumpet being surreptitiously opened and closed.



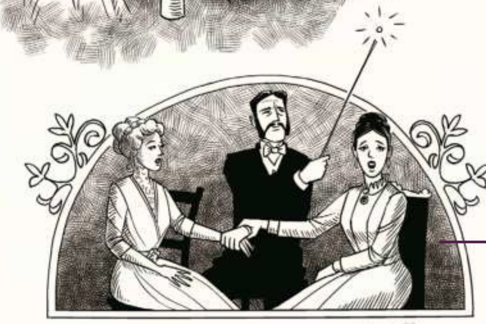
Sound effects

Should the ghostly tradesman have required it, the sound of sawing wood could be made by dragging the trumpet across the floor or moving the collapsible sections up and down within each other.



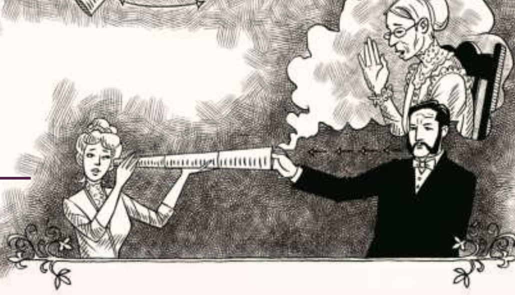
Spectral lights

Mysterious glowing orbs, objects or even faces could be produced by adding a dab of luminous paint to a stick, which would then appear to hover above the table.



Voices from the void

In other séances the trumpet would be the centre of attention rather than a sneaky secret, channelling spooky whispers from the beyond - either the medium was a ventriloquist or he had a hidden accomplice.



Deadly drowning

Most distressingly, one account recalls a medium sneaking a bowl of water onto the table and blowing through a straw to simulate drowning. He cried out, "Help me! Help me!" for good measure.

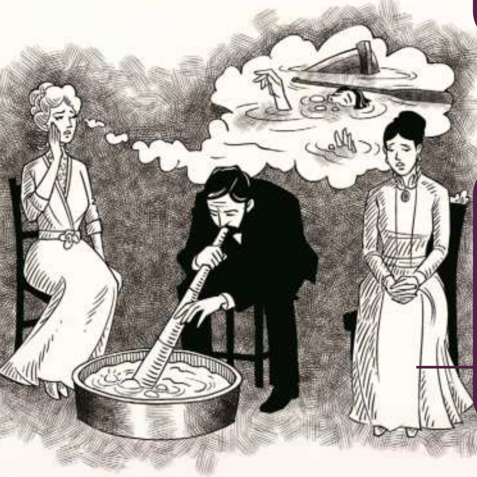
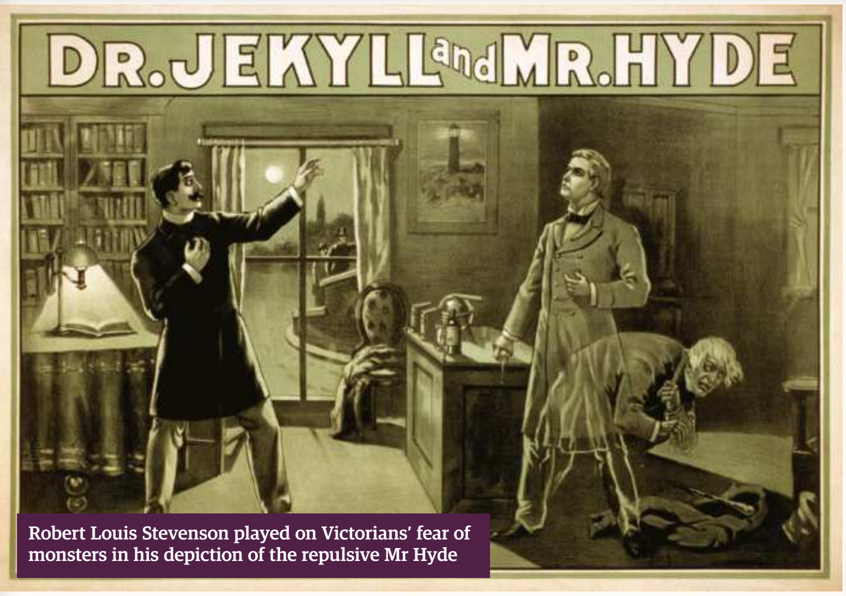


Illustration by Geri Ford / Art Agency


DR. JEKYLL and MR. HYDE

Robert Louis Stevenson played on Victorians' fear of monsters in his depiction of the repulsive Mr Hyde

Telling Ghost Stories

In an era of austere poverty and high mortality, the Victorians developed an appetite for horror

Gothic fiction was a type of horror story that originated in the late-18th century, but peaked during the Victorian era. From Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) to Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case Of Dr Jekyll And Mr Hyde* (1886), Victorian audiences were fed a literary diet of monsters and ghouls, both entertaining and frightening in equal measure.

This genre of fiction was not restricted to Britain; in Germany, the Schauerroman ('shudder novel') featured similar motifs, while in Russia, Vladimir Odoevsky penned *The Living Corpse* in 1838, with Aleksey Konstantinovich Tolstoy publishing *The Vampire* two years later. The most famous purveyor of Gothic fiction in the USA was Edgar Allan Poe, and his tales of madness were seen as following the German style of Gothic horror. *The Fall Of The House Of Usher* and his poem *The Raven* still send chills down spines today.

Victorian Gothic horror frequently involved death, or the fear of death, reflecting society's preoccupation with the subject – a result of high mortality rates and the constant threat of disease. Panics about crime and rural to urban migration also sparked concerns about the stranger in one's midst. People were less likely to know their neighbours in Victorian times than they would have done in earlier, more stable, rural communities, and the increasing number of strangers led to them being demonised in fiction.

The after-effects of the industrial revolution were felt in depictions of cities as sprawling, dark places, and the growing gap between rich and poor was also portrayed as something evil, as shown in works by authors such as Bram Stoker and Charles Dickens. But most of all, the obsession with Gothic literature reflected the Victorians' similar obsession with mortality, death, and mourning.

The Meaning of Monsters

19th-century authors created characters that played on contemporary fears about strangers, crime and disease. Here are the most famous

Dracula
Count Dracula, a vampire, was a creature caught between life and death. He is thought to reflect fears of immigration and sexual promiscuity. Being bitten is akin to being diseased, with 'cures' being sought to make the bitten well again.

Mr Hyde
The mysterious, hunchbacked Hyde is the alter-ego of Dr Jekyll, who has created a potion that enables him to become this repulsive being. Hyde represented both sex – something Victorians were keen to 'hide' – and the supernatural.

Frankenstein's monster
Victor Frankenstein's creation of a monster made of body parts from dead criminals reflected concerns about body snatchers, and how medicine and science – in particular, the development of electricity – could be used for evil as well as good.

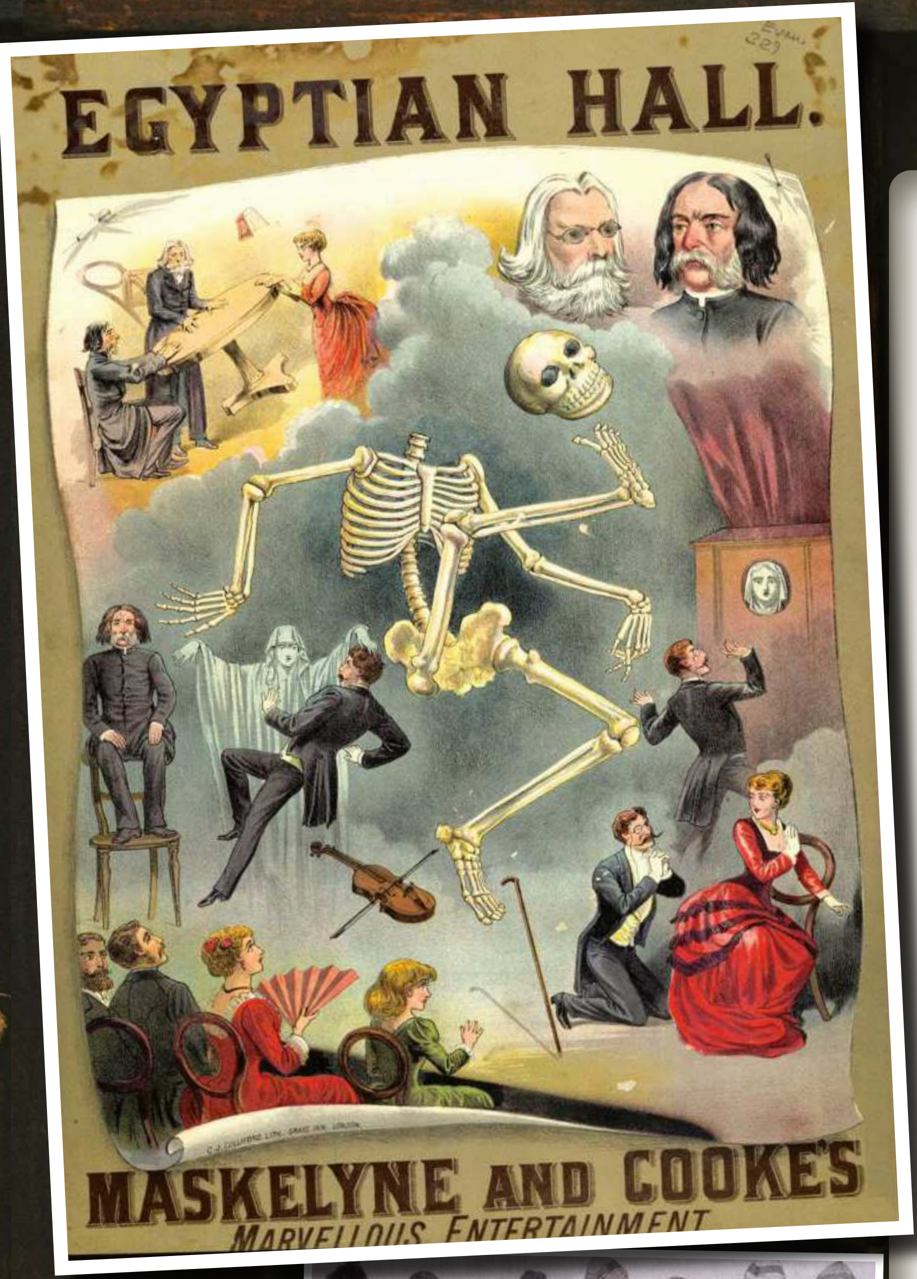
Heathcliff
The anti-hero of *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff is not a monster per se, but is certainly monstrous. He comes from an unknown background, is cruel and feared by others. His darkness and outcast status make him akin to Hyde and Frankenstein's monster.

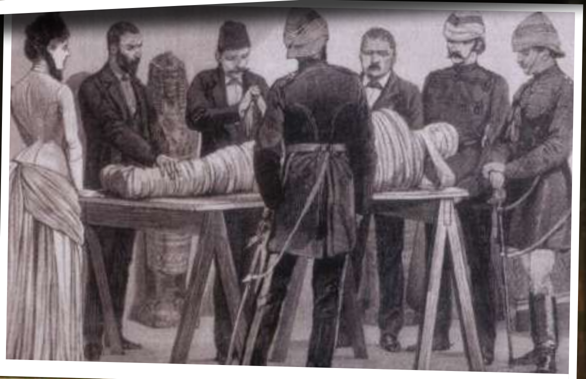
Murder & Mayhem At The Grand Guignol

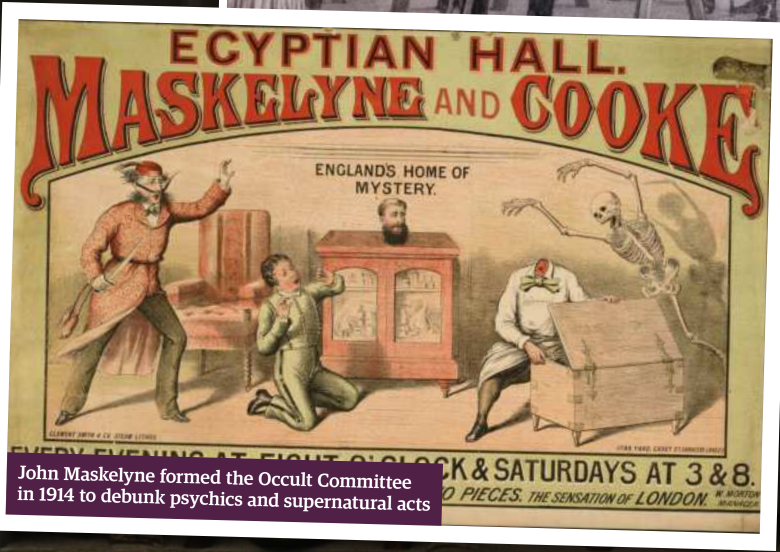
Before slasher movies, there was a French theatre of terror that turned stomachs

Opening in 1897, Paris's Théâtre du Grand-Guignol shocked and thrilled audiences with murder and torture so realistic it made people vomit and faint. It was originally designed to explore subjects not normally seen as fit for theatre – criminals, prostitutes and sinister asylums – to criticise the social inequalities of the era; its name was taken from a violent French puppet, in the style of English Punch and Judy, but the plays were strictly for adults.

The building had originally been a chapel, and the 'confessional'-style boxes, Gothic style and angels flanking the stage, bearing witness to the brutal acts, only added to the eerie ambience. Some plays looked at the individual consciousness and the passage from one existence to another, and this was key to the theatre's success. Death was ever present in real life, but the horrors of the Grand Guignol could actually offer comfort by helping audiences understand it – and the possibility of some form of life beyond the veil.






EGYPTIAN HALL.
MASKELYNE AND COOKE
ENGLAND'S HOME OF MYSTERY.
EVERY EVENING AT EIGHT O'CLOCK & SATURDAYS AT 3 & 8.
THE SENSATION OF LONDON.

John Maskelyne formed the Occult Committee in 1914 to debunk psychics and supernatural acts

The Mummy Returns

As Egyptomania swept through Victorian England, centuries-old corpses inspired a wave of creepy customs

Ancient Egyptians believed in giving their dead an appropriate send-off, constructing elaborate mausolea to them, and entombing their corpses with personal possessions that might assist them in the afterlife. For the Victorians, with their morbid and complex rituals, the example of these ancient people was one to follow. Throughout the 19th century, Egyptian influences could be found in women's mourning jewellery, which often featured obelisks or scarabs, and on tombs, mausolea, cemetery gates and even entire graveyards, which had an Egyptian style of architecture or decorative features.

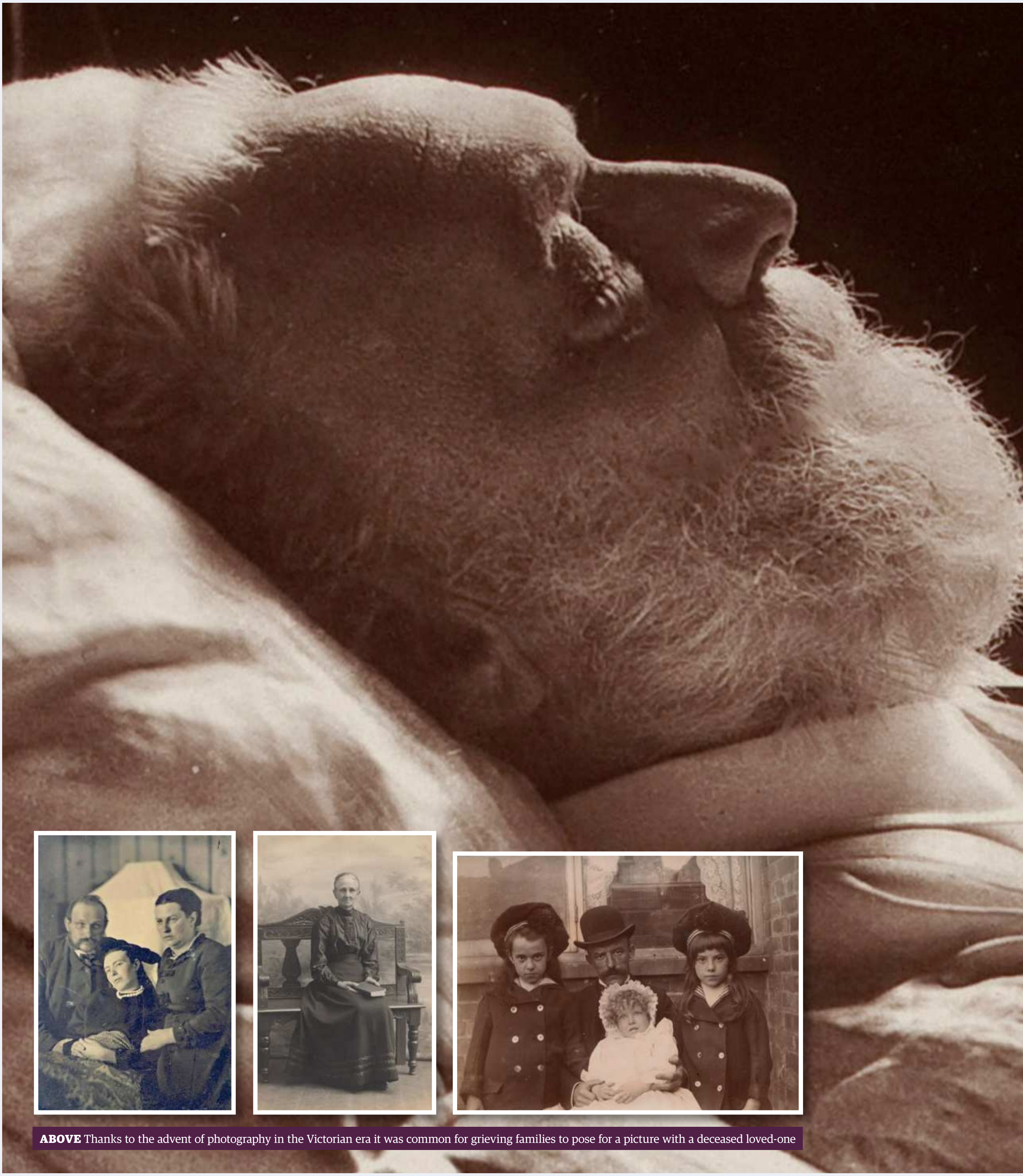
> "For his grand finale, Pettigrew would raise the mummy to its feet, as though it was still alive"

Ancient Egyptian texts were translated by German Egyptologist Karl Richard Lepsius in the 1840s, and detailed their beliefs about death and the afterlife, showing dead bodies reanimating. Naturally, the Victorians were very curious about Egyptian mummies. Antiquities had been brought from Egypt to Europe - especially England, but also Italy and Germany - in the late-18th and early-19th centuries, but now, these concealed corpses became objects of intense interest.

At the start of the era, surgeon Thomas Pettigrew began organising public events where people could go to watch mummies being unwrapped. However, these cod-scientific displays were, in reality, more about playing on people's desire to be scared and entertained in equal measure. Pettigrew would saw off parts of the mummy's skull, showing how the brains had been removed, and, for his grand finale, would raise the mummy to its feet, as though it was still alive. Such events continued throughout the century.

This link between fear, entertainment and science, with its specific Egyptian focus, was highlighted by the presence of the Egyptian Hall in London's Piccadilly. Built in Egyptian style in 1812, it was originally a museum designed to house curiosities from the South Seas, but by the late 1800s it was associated with séances, theatre and magic shows - consistent with the general trend toward spookiness, from the curious and enlightened 1820s to the morbidly fascinated 1880s. The in-house duo of Maskelyne and Cooke did openly fake séances and hauntings, and it became famous for 'anti spiritualism'. John Nevil Maskelyne probably wondered why he bothered. So skilful were the pair's recreations that, "...the Spiritualists had no alternative but to claim us as the most powerful spirit mediums who found it more profitable to deny the assistance of spirits."

In a world that was advancing at an unprecedented pace - where steam trains carved a path through the countryside and suspension bridges loomed large on the landscape - the Victorian era was also a golden age of belief. Religion, spiritualism and magic pervaded every aspect of daily life, from literature and architecture, to fashion and social etiquette - it was a unique period in history where science and the supernatural were often one and the same.



ABOVE Thanks to the advent of photography in the Victorian era it was common for grieving families to pose for a picture with a deceased loved-one

3x © Alamy

Memento Mori

Inside the disturbing world of Victorian post-mortem photography

Written by Callum McKelvie

While many things in life are unknown, an unfortunate certainty is its inevitable end. Throughout history, different cultures and societies have had their own unique approaches to this grim subject. The Ancient Egyptians, for example, had complex burial rituals, while during the medieval period religious thought, preoccupied with visions of Heaven and Hell, dominated much of western Europe. But perhaps one of the most interesting and peculiar cultures through which to examine our relationship with death is that of the Victorians. They were obsessed with the spirit world, ghosts and funeral culture. One of the most bizarre ways they demonstrated this was through the new art of post-mortem photography, which is literally what it sounds like: a photograph taken of someone after they've died. These photographs were a sensation in the latter half of the 19th century in Europe, the USA and Great Britain.

For context, however, it's first important to delve a little deeper into the Victorian attitude towards death and explore some of their customs surrounding funerals. In the 19th century, in both Great Britain and the USA, death was a highly ritualised event, especially for the woman of the household. After the death of her husband, a widow was expected to be in 'deep mourning' for a year and then spend a second in 'half mourning'. Perhaps most distressingly, during the first year a widow was expected to be in strict isolation and could not receive visitors to the home or attend public events, except church. During half mourning, visitors were allowed and the widow could wear some trim on her black attire. Such was the familiarity of death to the Victorian woman that they would often make their own shroud, including them in the wedding dowry.

Post-mortem photograph of Victor Hugo, the author of *Les Miserables*

Image source: wiki/ Nadar, MOPA

How exactly does this concern photographing dead people? Photography was at this time a new and exciting medium, and offered a permanent memento of an individual. This was the period in which people wore lockets and made jewellery or even wreaths from the hair of a dead loved one. As a result, mementos were highly sought-after and photography was a new way to obtain one. Indeed, some sources estimate that photographers were more likely to record deaths over weddings by some three to one margin. In some areas a post-mortem photography became a practice that went hand-in-hand with a funeral and images were distributed among friends and relatives.

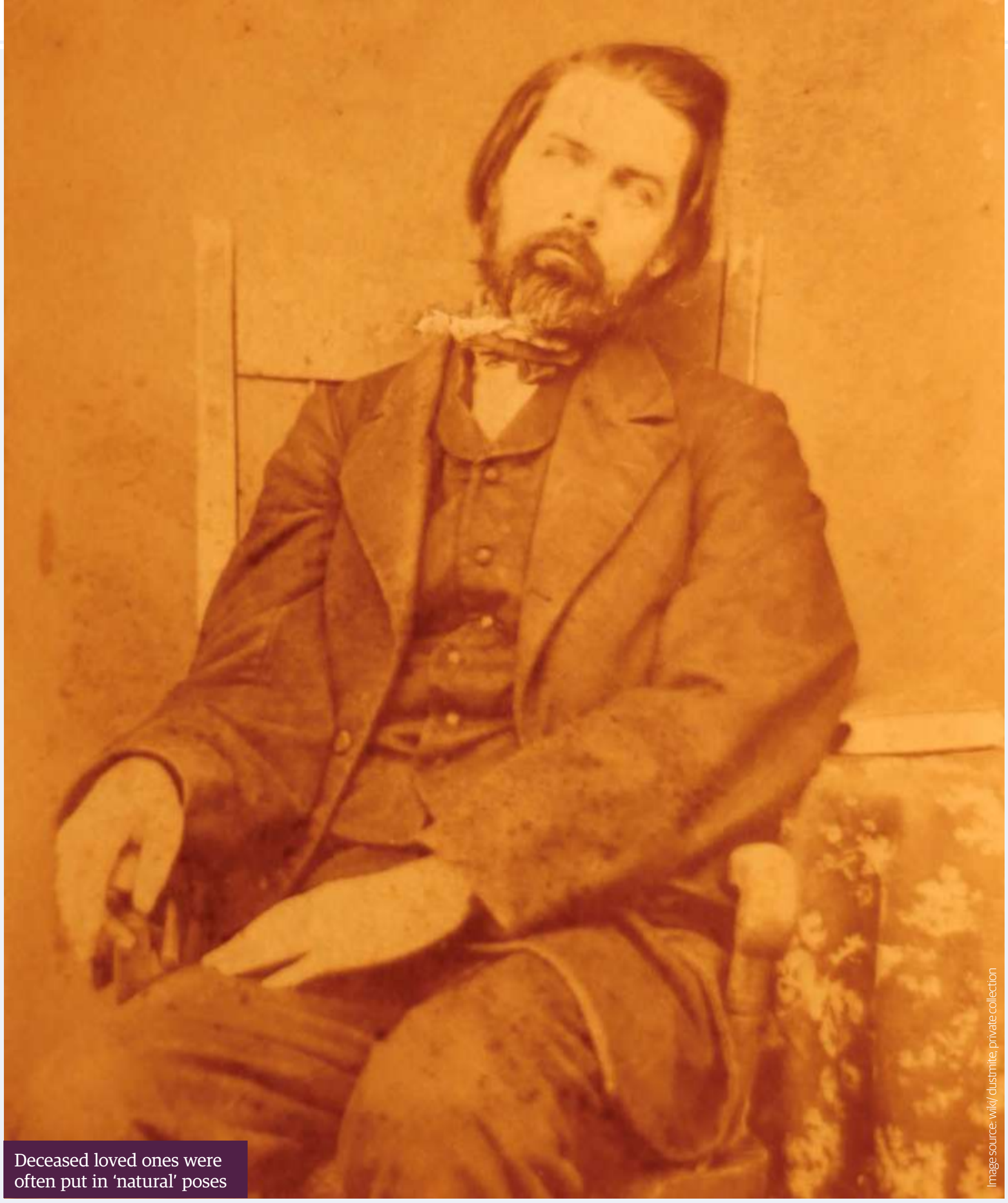
Why was photography such a widely available and popular medium? The story of the mass-market photograph began when Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre revealed the first successful photographic method, known as 'Daguerreotype', in the 1830s. This method was based on the principle of reversing an image, using a silvered copper plate, the resultant image being a combination of silver and mercury resting on this plate. These images were extremely delicate, so much so that the components could even be brushed off. In 1851, however, Frederick Scott Archer's 'Wet Collodion Process' brought a number of advantages that made the medium incredibly popular. Firstly, numerous copies could be made (unlike Daguerrotypes) and secondly the exposure time was less (meaning images could be taken outside). Perhaps most importantly, it was cheap and its success drastically lowered the price of other methods. For example, in the US in 1850 a single Daguerreotype cost only 25 cents. Grieving families who had had no opportunity to obtain an image of their loved one during their lifetime, due to the expensive nature of portraiture, now had an opportunity to do so.

In contemporary times some of these images have seen a resurgence in interest due to the morbid way in which they were composed. While the majority seem to depict the individuals in their coffins or as if they were asleep, some of the more macabre examples have the deceased posed as if they were alive. In these photos the corpse is shown sitting or being propped up by family members. On some websites this has led to games of 'spot the cadaver' as people debate over whether an image is a post-mortem photograph or just a particularly dead-eyed model.

Prof. C.A. Bjerknes

Some photos were more conventional images of a corpse in an open casket

© Alamy



Deceased loved ones were often put in 'natural' poses

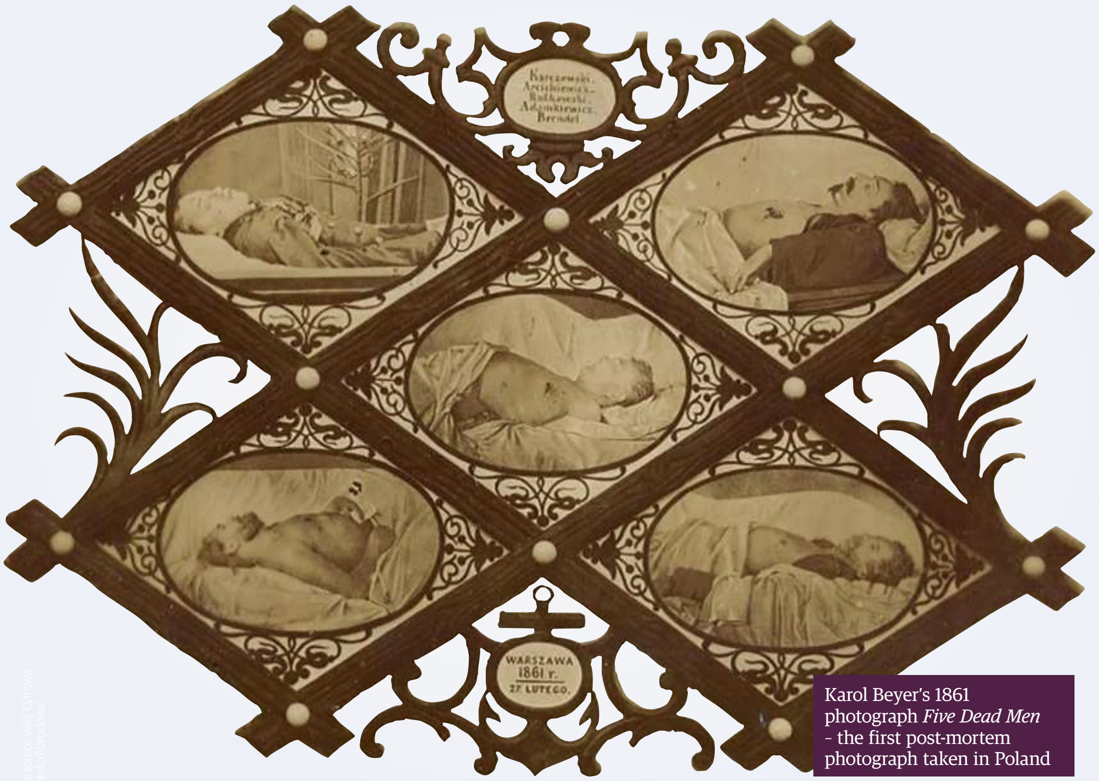
Image source: wiki/ dustmite, private collection

> "Photographers were more likely to record deaths over weddings by some three to one"

As post-mortem photography became a regular and common practice, it's said that photographers invented new and unique ways in which to pose their 'models'. While stories abound of 'posing stands' used to prop up the dead, research suggests that these were in fact a common occurrence for living models during the period because exposure times were a lot longer. While the best possible care has been taken in selecting the images here, in some cases it is impossible to tell the authenticity of a post-mortem photograph.

Perhaps the most bizarre method of keeping models still was used on both the living and the dead. Given the long exposure times, taking images of young children was almost impossible due to an infant's tendency to cry, wriggle and spoil the process in every possible way. Thus an ingenious role was invented, that of the 'hidden mother'. The baby's actual mother would be disguised as either cushions or a backdrop and hold the infant. Others were far more obvious, such as using techniques to photographically remove the head of the mother. A sepia-toned image depicting a human-shaped bundle of rags holding a small child can be somewhat creepy, even more so when it's possible not every child photographed is alive. Although it's impossible to prove, a small number of examples show infants with what appears to be sunken eyes and possible stitching on their mouth. Naturally, this hidden mother method would both help to pose the dead body and also help to further give the illusion of life due to the sheer number of hidden mother photographs already in circulation.

In Poland the trend for death photography was particularly prevalent, and it was the work of Karol Beyer that garnered the most attention. Here, however, post-mortem photography took on a distinctly political role, curiously helping to unify the nation against a greater enemy. In the 1860s Polish anti-tsarist sentiment had begun to grow and would lead to the so-called 'January Uprising' that would begin in 1863 and last until mid-1864. Prior to this event, a protest against the tsar took place in Warsaw in 1861, and on 25 February, as a misguided and viscous means of quelling discontent, the army was given orders to shoot five of the participants. Beyer rushed to photograph the bodies and



Karol Beyer's 1861 photograph *Five Dead Men* - the first post-mortem photograph taken in Poland

Image source: wiki/ Cyfrowa Biblioteka Narodowa

arranged them in a distinct tableaux, distributing cards of the work across Poland. The result was an incredibly distinctive image that helped create a record of the actions of the Russian military but far more importantly helped unify and consolidate national sentiment against the tsar and in favour of this growing national movement against Russia.

As this suggests, in some cases these photos weren't even of loved ones and were sold en masse. Victor Hugo, the author of Les Miserables and The Hunchback of Notre Dame, was one of the celebrities who had photos of his body printed on cards and sold to enthusiastic punters. But Hugo wasn't alone in being immortalised in such a manner and is in illustrious company, including fellow novelist Marcel Proust and painter Gustave Dore. The former was a particularly late example, taken in 1922. Certainly not part of the Victorian trend, this photograph was taken by famed French photographic artist 'Man Ray', whose expertise was usually in creating abstract photographs. Through exposing objects to light and using the negative image he created what were called 'Photograms' or 'Rayographs'. The photo of Proust was an altogether different matter and taken at the urging of Ray's friend Jean Cocteau. Commentating on the photo of Proust, Cocteau stated: "Those who have seen this profile of calm, of order, of plenitude, will never forget the spectacle of an unbelievable recording device come to a stop, becoming an art object: a masterpiece of repose next to a heap of notebooks where our friend's genius continues to live on like the wristwatch of a dead soldier."

From a contemporary perspective, one of the most shocking things about post-mortem photography is how many depict children. Throughout the 19th century, the infant mortality rate was distressingly high. As Patricia Jalland points out in her book Death In The Victorian Family, in 1840 the number of deaths per 1,000 births was an average of 154, 148 in 1860, 153 in 1880, and 154 in 1900. This totalled some 100,000 infants dying every year before reaching their first birthday, the causes often being bronchitis, diarrhoea, pneumonia and a variety of other diseases. As Sarah Seaton, author of Childhood & Death In Victorian England, notes: 'To a 21st century person there are lots of visual mementos (if one is lucky) of a passed loved one. In the Victorian period, photography was still relatively new, complicated and expensive, so photographs, particularly of children, were not often taken. However, it is easy to understand why photographs were taken of deceased loved ones, whether alone or with other family members, as it may be the family's one and only chance to gain a memento of their precious child." Perhaps as a result of this, the children were often photographed either with their parents or as part of a family line up, their position dictated by their age. With younger children in particular, some sources state the eyes were painted onto the eyelids in order to better give the appearance of life.

While it's incredibly easy for a modern audience to look at the photographs shown here and shrink away in disgust or morbid horror, it is important to remember the context within which they were taken. As the Industrial Revolution turned London into an overpopulated metropolis without proper sanitary facilities, cholera outbreaks were a frequent occurrence, firstly in 1831. This was soon followed by outbreaks of influenza in 1837 and typhoid in 1838. Indeed, the Victorian period is full of epidemics that ravaged the population, including the 1889-90 flu epidemic, the recurrence of which would lead to the death of Queen Victoria's grandson Albert Victor. In fact, Victoria herself is a symbol of the nation's attitude towards death, choosing to wear black mourning attire after her husband Prince Albert's passing in 1861 until her own death in 1901. In the Victorian period, death was an everyday fact and people chose not to shy away or hide from it. Post-mortem photography should not be remembered as some horrific 'fad' but as a means for mourning families to obtain a precious memento of a lost loved one.

Such images were a precious keepsake for grieving relatives

Better Dying Through Chemistry: Embalming and War

Preserving the dead was developed during the Civil War and had a lasting impact on military and civilian funerals through the modern era

Written by Kelly Christian

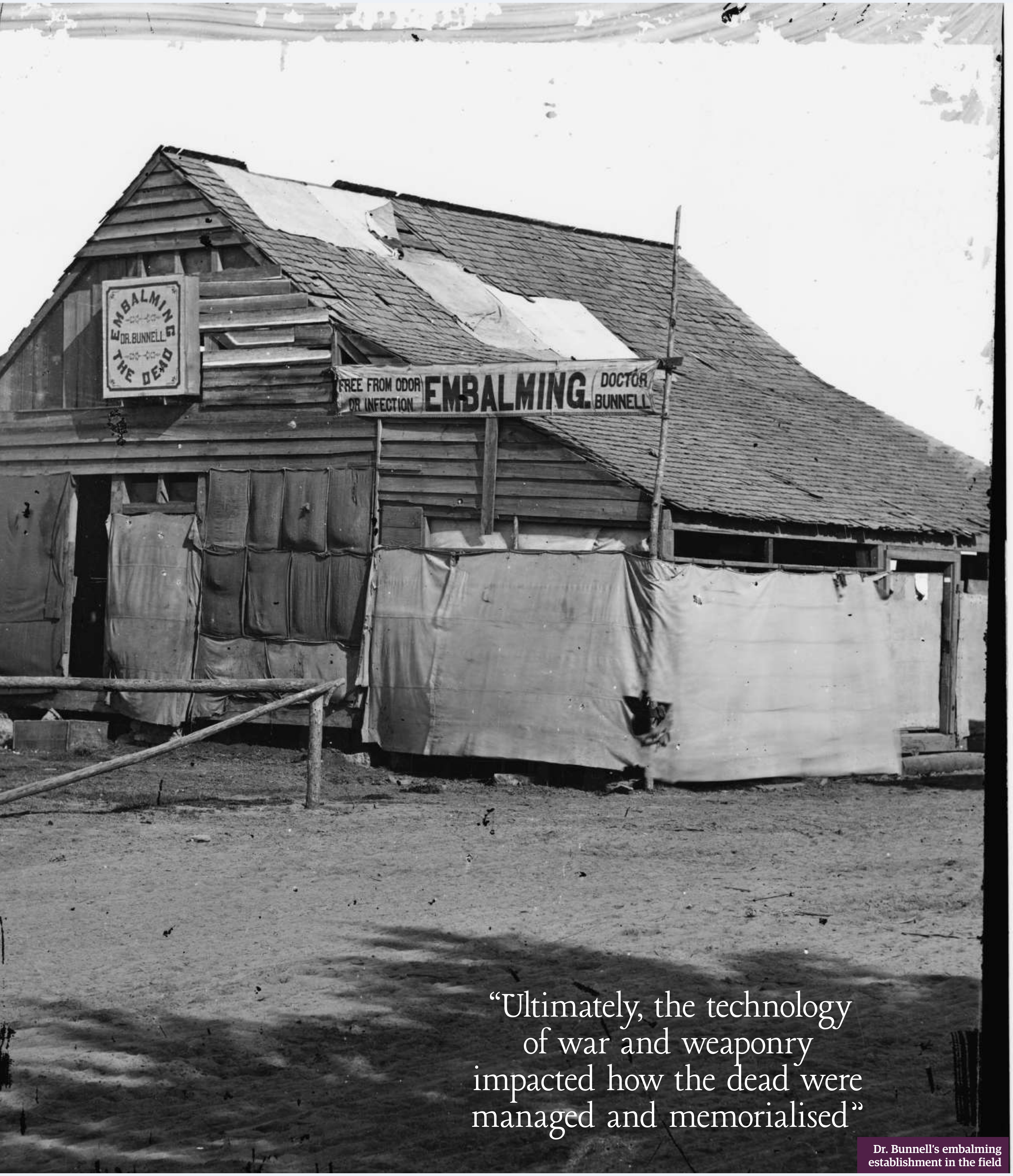
The violence and trauma of war is nothing new. The scope of human existence is marked by conflict, which has evolved steadily into the modern era with new degrees of arms and weaponry. As the stage of war shifted to include new technologies, managing the morbid aftermath also had to evolve. Ultimately, the technology of war and weaponry impacted how the dead were managed, buried and memorialised. Embalming, which became popularised during the American Civil War, sought to temporarily preserve the dead, and allowed for burial rites, viewing and a final goodbye.

Embalming was not a popular practice before the 19th century, but various cultures explored bodily preservation after death. The Ancient Egyptians practised a form of embalming with mummification, requiring that the blood be drained, many internal organs to be removed, and the body itself to be salted and dried. This 70-day process was often reserved for pharaohs and other important civic members, as well as some animals. Indigenous Chilean peoples, the Chinchorros, explored embalming methods, as did the Chinese, and many other cultures across the globe.

However, the practice of embalming as we know it today has more similar origins in Europe as far back as the 14th century. These initial explorations involved stuffing aromatic herbs within the body, draining the blood, or even removing parts of the body to attempt to slow the inevitable decomposition. Embalming was used in rare circumstances, such as ensuring that a recently deceased member of the aristocracy could be viewed by their subjects.

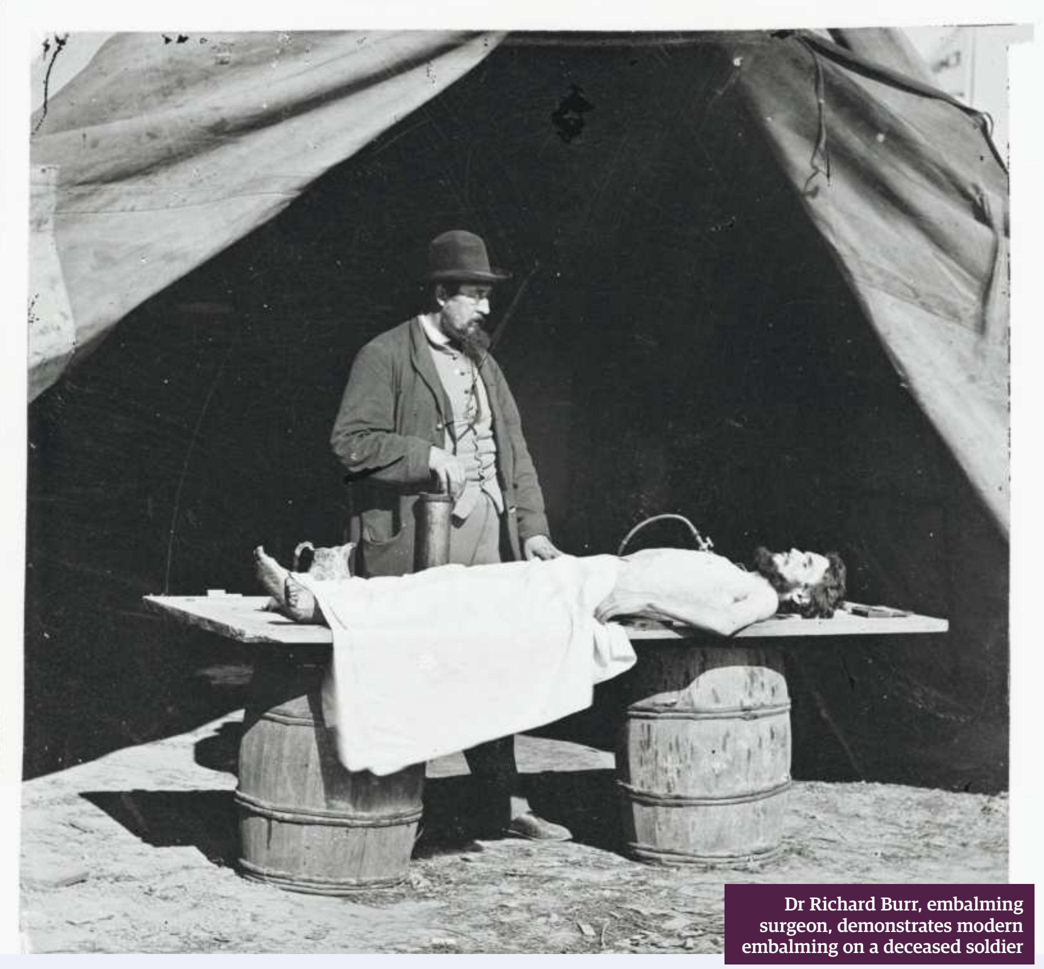
While these more rudimentary techniques sought to preserve the body in a more general way, it wasn't until the middle of the 19th century that chemicals would be used to preserve the likeness of someone as if they were still alive. French chemist and inventor Jean-Nicolas Gannal published his seminal work, *Histoire des Embaumements*, in 1838, and it was translated to English in 1840. This groundwork for arterial embalming, where injections of chemicals into the carotid artery was laid by Gannal, fundamentally shaped the development of embalming as a standardised and modern process.

The astounding number of deaths in the American Civil War would greatly shape funerary norms and embalming normalisation. The war


EMBALMING
DR. BUNNELL
THE DEAD
FREE FROM ODOR
OR INFECTION.
EMBALMING.
DOCTOR
BUNNELL

> "Ultimately, the technology of war and weaponry impacted how the dead were managed and memorialised"

Dr. Bunnell's embalming establishment in the field



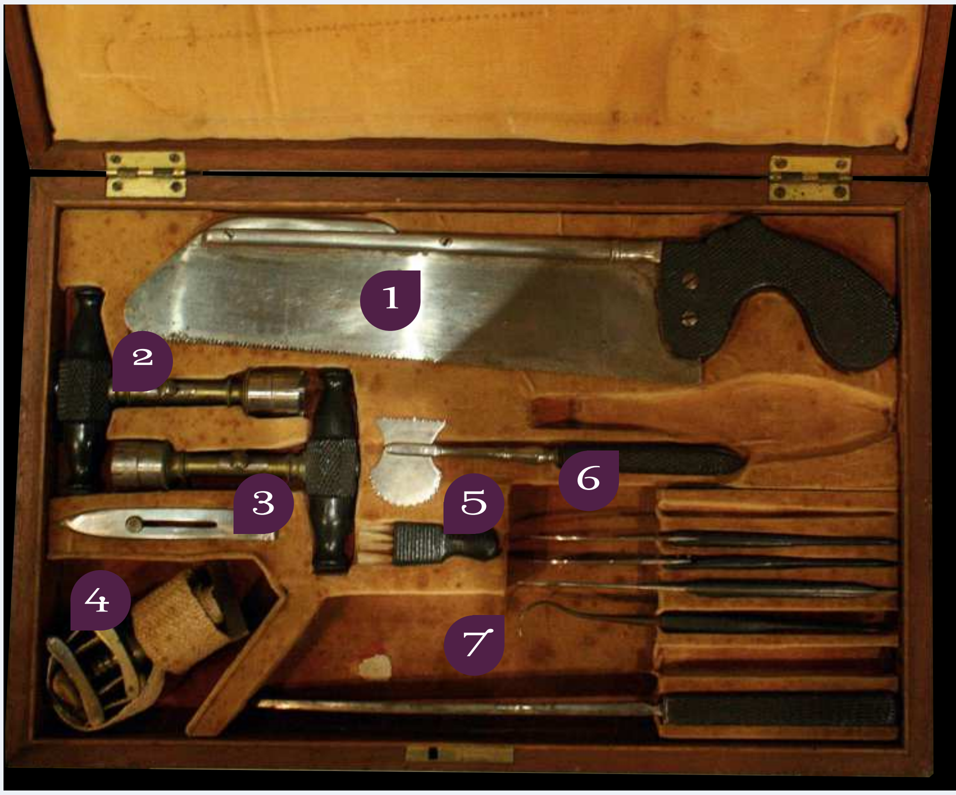
Dr Richard Burr, embalming surgeon, demonstrates modern embalming on a deceased soldier

began with the bombing of Fort Sumter, just off the coast of mainland South Carolina. The very early hours of 12 April 1861 marked the beginning of a conflict that would eventually end the lives of around 750,000 Americans over the course of four years, making it the deadliest war on American soil. The Civil War was responsible for killing 2% of the entire population of the United States and provided a significant opportunity for developing new technologies for managing the deceased.

The lives of many soldiers ended on the battlefield. The staggering numbers of death from battle came from bullets, bayonets and cannonballs. After the battle was done, it was up to the remaining soldiers to return to the grounds to take stock of the carnage. Many would return to the sprawling fields and forests to find their fallen comrades and prepare to bury their remains. Some of the dead would be wrapped in a sheet while the living got to the work of digging the hole. Most soldiers were buried where they fell, contained within a shallow grave, which was often shared with others who died nearby - communal graves were not uncommon. Many graves contained the remains of both Union and Confederate soldiers, as many soldiers took their last breath in enemy territory. In death, the soldiers became equals, both fighting for their country and sharing the earth together in burial.

Those who initially survived the battlefield often ended up in field hospitals, where death surrounded them and stalked them. Pneumonia, gangrene, typhoid, dysentery and malaria ravaged the wounded men. While medical professionals attempted to tend to the dizzying number of amputations and illnesses around them, disease spread rampantly. Prior to Louis Pasteur's discovery of germ theory in 1870, there was little regard for hygienic standards in the medical practice. A bone saw may be bloodied by the removal of one soldier's leg, and then used immediately after for his comrade's arm. Infection spread quickly with these kinds of practices, and took the lives of thousands of men, who wasted away in agony.

Many soldiers died far away from their families, shifting the tradition of home burials to something that was no longer feasible. The unavoidable decay of the deceased soldier was a race against time that few families ever won. Embalming,



The Surgeon's Toolkit

Surgeons were also trained as embalmers in the Civil War, and many of the required tools for the job served both the living and the dead

1 Bone saw Also known as Capital or Amputation Saw, this strong and sharp blade was able to saw through large bones for amputations.

2 Trephines This cylindrical blade was used to cut circular holes in tissue or bone. It was also used to cut into the skull to relieve pressure. The handle gave the surgeon additional leverage.

3 Scalpel Scalpels were used for incisions of all kinds.

4 Screw-type tourniquet materials Tourniquets create tight bandages to stop severe bleeding. This could also stop embalming fluid from leaking while the skin was being sewn back up.

5 Small brush Small brushes would be used to brush away fine bits of bone during amputations, or clean the grooves or teeth of other medical tools.

6 Hay's saw This small saw assisted the trephines in cutting through tissue or bone.

7 Various surgical instruments Including bone awl, artery hooks, and blades (bottom right). Small blades and implements assisted in cutting through skin and muscle, or separating out different kinds of tissue.

Horse-drawn German ambulances suffer bomb damage during World War I

Operating Tent Camp Letterman Gettysburg Pa.

Incidents of the War.

> “On the battlefield, budding embalmers sought out test subjects to hone their craft”

however, provided an opportunity for the living to say goodbye to their beloved dead. The Victorians valued a ‘good death’, a concept whereby the dying could pass away at home, surrounded by family, and be spiritually and emotionally prepared for their final breath. Obviously this was not possible with battlefield deaths, but it at least offered some closure to the soldiers’ families.

Dr Thomas Holmes was one of the first and most prominent practitioners of embalming. His formal medical training often included work on cadavers, and he became interested in how bodies were able to be stabilised for his scholarly practice. After working with a phrenologist to conduct research on Egyptian mummies, Holmes became convinced that the human body could be preserved safely with chemicals. Early attempts at embalming followed the arterial embalming method, draining the veins and arteries and replacing it. Toxic materials such as arsenic and mercury were used initially, varying greatly from modern embalming fluids, which are often a cocktail of formaldehyde, glutaraldehyde, phenol, methanol and others. The timing of his work could not have been better, as his initial embalming experiments were completed just before the Civil War broke out. His services as a mortician would eventually lead him to be called the American ‘father of modern embalming’.

Embalming was introduced to the public through the death and preservation of Colonel Elmer M Ellsworth. Ellsworth was a colonel of the Army Medical Corps for the Union, and a close colleague of President Abraham Lincoln. He was also the first Union officer to die in the Civil War. Ellsworth met his untimely demise while removing a huge Confederate flag from the top of an inn in Alexandria, Virginia, which could be seen from the White House, just across the Potomac River. Lincoln himself requested that Ellsworth lay in state so that the public may come to view and memorialise him, and thus began the work of Dr Holmes and his embalming method.

Lincoln eventually solicited Holmes to train surgeons working on the front lines with this new procedure. The vast number of dead bodies offered plenty of opportunities for budding embalmers to hone their craft, as it was on the battlefield that embalmers sought out their test subjects. Holmes set up shop instructing the procedure. First, blood was to be removed from all arteries and veins. For soldiers who died on the field, many of them met their end violently and bled out before they were brought to the embalmer, allowing the surgeon to skip this step. Second, an incision would be cut into the axillary (armpit) artery, and an instrument composed of a rubber ball attached to a small hose would be inserted into it. This would pump the embalming fluid into the veins. Holmes sold his own brand of embalming fluid for $3 per bottle, and eventually patented his own embalming syringe many years later in 1890.

With the Holmes method spreading in dismal popularity, embalming barns and tents popped up across the landscape with their chemistry and instruments waiting for the living to cease. Newly trained practitioners gathered corpses off the field, employed their embalming techniques, and hoped their investment would pay off. Many in the trade worked with families hoping to secure their services after locating the body of their loved one. Unclaimed bodies might be embalmed and then displayed in a storefront to display the embalmer’s handiwork as a kind of advertisement. More dubious embalmers found the dead, embalmed them, and held them hostage until the family paid for the unsolicited service. This unfortunate exchange highlights the lack of regulation for death care at this time.

While it is standard practice for contemporary funeral directors to set the face and prepare the body for viewing, many embalmers completed their service by simply cleaning the body and securing any major wounds to ensure that the body would be sent home safely. Soldiers were then sent off in a coffin or box, sometimes lined with materials such as zinc to aid the preservation process. Many cabinet and furniture makers found additional income in the embalming business, as they could then use their own wooden vessels for the final step of sending the dead on their last journey home.

Of all of the deaths, it is estimated that nearly 40,000 soldiers were eventually embalmed, most of whom died not knowing that their bodies

Death Tolls by Modern Equivalents

It can be difficult to conceptualise the scope of mass death during war, but contemporary analysis can provide more insight

American Civil War

750,000 people died during **the American Civil War.**

Of an **American population of 31 million**, that's **2.3%** who died.

In **modern-day standards**, that's **6.5 million people dead**, equal to the population of both **Chicago** and **Los Angeles**.

World War I

Around 21.5 million people died during **World War I**.

Of a **world population** of **1.8 billion**, that's **1.2%** who died.

In **modern-day standards**, that's **93.5 million people dead**, more than the entire population of **the UK, Austria, Belgium** and **Denmark.**

World War II

75 million people died during **World War II**.

Of a **world population of 2.3 billion**, that's **3.3%** who died.

In **modern-day standards**, that's **257 million people dead**, equal to the entire population of **Russia, Germany, Greece** and **The Netherlands**.

would be preserved. Nearly all embalmed soldiers were from the Union army, as the Confederacy never implemented an embalming practice in their military. It is thought Dr. Holmes embalmed more than 4,000 soldiers, charging up to $100 per body ($1,600 in today's currency). Enlisted men, their families and relief associations banded together to raise funds to secure embalming services of fallen soldiers so that they could be shipped home. The cost was prohibitive for many, meaning that working-class families were not afforded the opportunity to have their fallen soldiers returned to them. While some practitioners of embalming sought to have soldiers pre-pay before entering battle, this practice became discouraged under General Ulysses S Grant in January 1865, citing that such morbid preparations had a negative effect on morale.

Just months later, President Lincoln was assassinated at Ford's Theater by John Wilkes Booth, and became the first president to be embalmed. His body lay in state in Washington D.C., and then travelled by funeral train, making 180 stops across seven states for grieving Americans to view their fallen leader. The train was destined for Springfield, Illinois, where Lincoln would be buried. By the end of his journey, Lincoln remained intact, a feat that wouldn't have been possible without the new embalming method.

> "The stress of managing a decaying body in the summer heat no longer haunted families"

When the American Civil War ended on 9 May 1865, battlefield casualties ceased, but the grief and mourning continued. Nearly all families were impacted by the loss of a brother, father, uncle or cousin. Towns were wiped out, and the American landscape was scarred with the loss of life. Morticians took their practices off of the battlefield, and set up shop in towns across America, ready to provide the service of embalming to civilians laying their loved ones to rest.

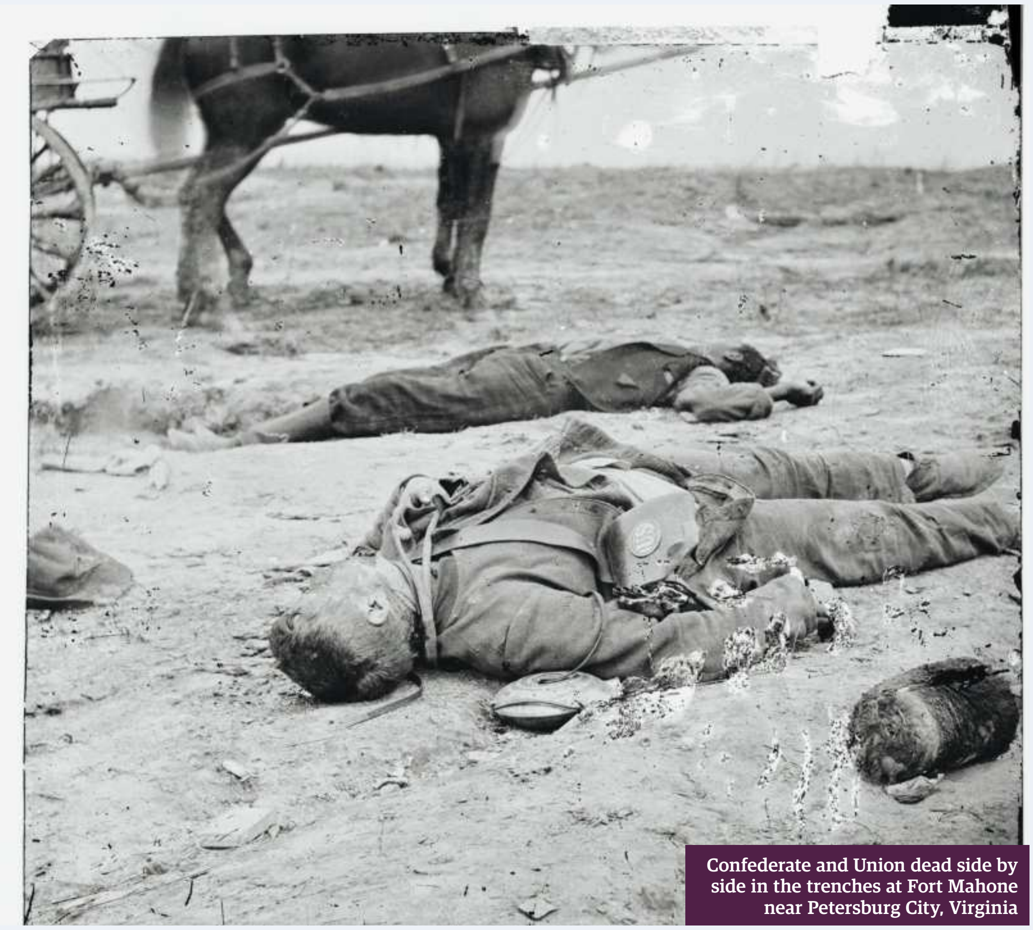
While bodies were no longer being shipped across states to their homes, families had a new-found interest in outsourcing the troubling work of preparing the dead to professionals who could offer a variety of services. Embalming became a regular occurrence in burial rites because of its popularity and use during the Civil War. The stress of managing a decaying body in the summer heat no longer haunted families who were also grieving. The dead could be managed by a mortician who would clean, embalm and display the body for their families in the safety of a funeral parlour, removing the dead from the family and ensuring a hygienic display. Embalming was both modern and clean. Families could now send for far-away relatives to come home for a funeral, and embalming would ensure that the dead would be suitable for such a service.

While military conflicts continued throughout the end of the 19th and into the early 20th century, mass deaths from war did not peak again until World War I. The many millions of people, both military and civilian, that lost their lives would all be buried and grieved by the living. World War I was marked with an increase in brutality because of the introduction of submarines, tanks, missiles, machine-guns and chemical weapons. The effects of these new military developments were astonishing, and shaped how the dead were dealt with.

During the American Civil War, the number one killer was bullet wounds, which tore mangled holes through limbs and trunks alike. The French-designed Minié bullet was designed for maximum carnage, but did not obliterate the entire body. The leading killers of World War I were mechanised artillery, followed by small arms, and, finally, chemical weapons such as poisonous gas. Paired with the turmoils of trench warfare, World War I was a savage landscape of destruction. Automatic weapons had the capacity to completely destroy the enemy, and decimate the entire body.

The exceptionally violent arms technology, mass destruction of the environment and raging flu pandemic of 1918 made it exceptionally difficult to track the number of casualties during World War I. The dead were everywhere: buried in trench mud, mangled in barbed wire across no man's land and sprawled in bombed-out buildings. There was no national system for burying the dead - enemy territory was a concept only for the living, as many of the dead, like those of the American Civil War, were buried where they fell. There were no embalming barns at the front lines of this war, but rather communal graves. Towns near particularly violent battles assisted with the dead, with many creating additions to local cemeteries in which to bury the soldiers who were killed nearby.

The lack of standard burials in World War I led to an increase in public monuments. These cenotaphs spoke to the great losses that so many countries had suffered. The implementation of monuments were resurrected in place of individual plots, as many soldiers were not found, remained unidentified, or whose international or even communal burials were not noted. Few soldiers made it home for burial, despite the demands of their next of kin. The challenge of locating the buried remains, preparing them for shipment, and sending them across the Atlantic to return home was truly daunting. For those who died in France, there was a ban on removing bodies as the French began to rebuild their decimated country, citing that mass disinterments would limit the reconstruction. The ban was not lifted until 1920, when remains would no longer be recognisable.



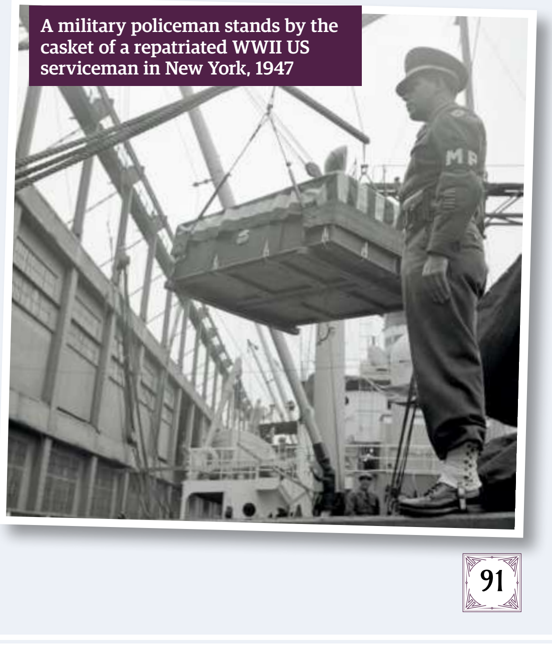
Confederate and Union dead side by side in the trenches at Fort Mahone near Petersburg City, Virginia

Infections spread easily in hospitals before Louis Pasteur's discovery of germ theory in 1870

Repatriating bodily remains after war became an expectation after World War I. This would prove to be challenging just 21 years later. The mass destruction of human life in World War II was the highest in any military conflict in human history and spanned across great distances, with more than 75 million people losing their lives. The vast numbers of dead were nearly impossible to track, let alone return to their home countries. The incredible violence of evolving military technology during battle, in conjunction with the staggering number of executions, presented a harrowing problem for those left to manage the dead. Preserving the body for travel was less feasible than it had been in smaller-scale conflicts battled on home soil. In such large conflicts with huge amounts of death and destruction, embalming was a rare treatment for those who died.

As with many who died before them, the dead, or what remained of them, were buried where they lay. Still, families requested that the bodies of their fallen loved ones be returned to them after World War II came to an end on 2 September 1945. Many of the bodies being sent home after the end of the war were exhumed from where they lay and transported to American soil. Others were moved to official burial grounds and monuments in the country where they fell but in more official cemeteries.

Embalming is a standard practice today because practitioners were able to hone their craft during the Civil War. The desire to preserve the deceased as they were in life provided comfort to those mourning their loved ones during this period, but that impulse has lasted into the 21st century. The atrocities of World War I and II provided additional challenges for managing the vast number of deaths where services such as embalming were often not available, but despite this, embalming became a staple of funerary practices as a means to ensure something resembling a 'good death', a concept that has quietly stayed with us since the Victorian era. For those who served, embalming offers an opportunity for the dead to return home for their final goodbye.



A military policeman stands by the casket of a repatriated WWII US serviceman in New York, 1947

Death In Culture

94 Western Death Practices And Attitudes

Whether it's burying or cremating the dead, fearing death or considering it the start of a sacred journey, humans have been creative around this fact of life

102 In The Court Of King Death

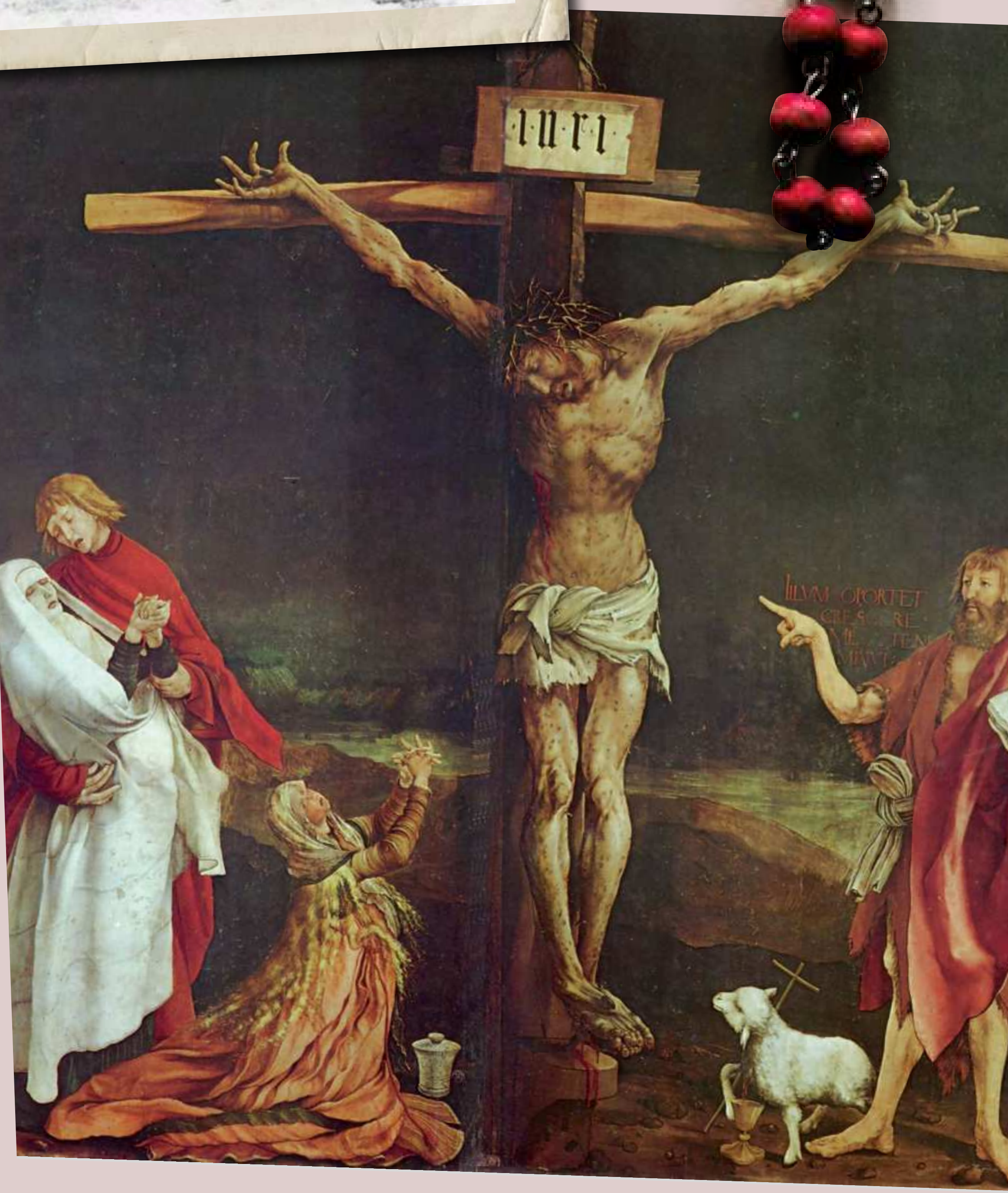
Death is life's non-negotiable – religion is the human half of the contract

112 Staring Death In The Face

In some cultures, physical death is not something to be secreted away – it's a cause for celebration

120 Ghost Festivals

All over the world, ghost festivals are a common and often ancient practice. They are held to venerate, celebrate and remember the dead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Western Death Practices and Attitudes

Whether it's burying or cremating the dead, fearing death or considering it the start of a sacred journey, humans have been creative around this ultimate fact of life

Written by Bess Lovejoy

Care of the dead has been a part of human societies since the beginning. Indeed, some philosophers suggest it is the fundamental marker separating humans from other animals. In his book *The Work Of The Dead*, historian Thomas W. Laqueur says care of the dead is "a, if not the, sign of our emergence from the order of nature into culture". Yet the ways humans have cared for their dead - and their ideas about death in general - have varied greatly over time.

A Brief History Of Western Death Practices

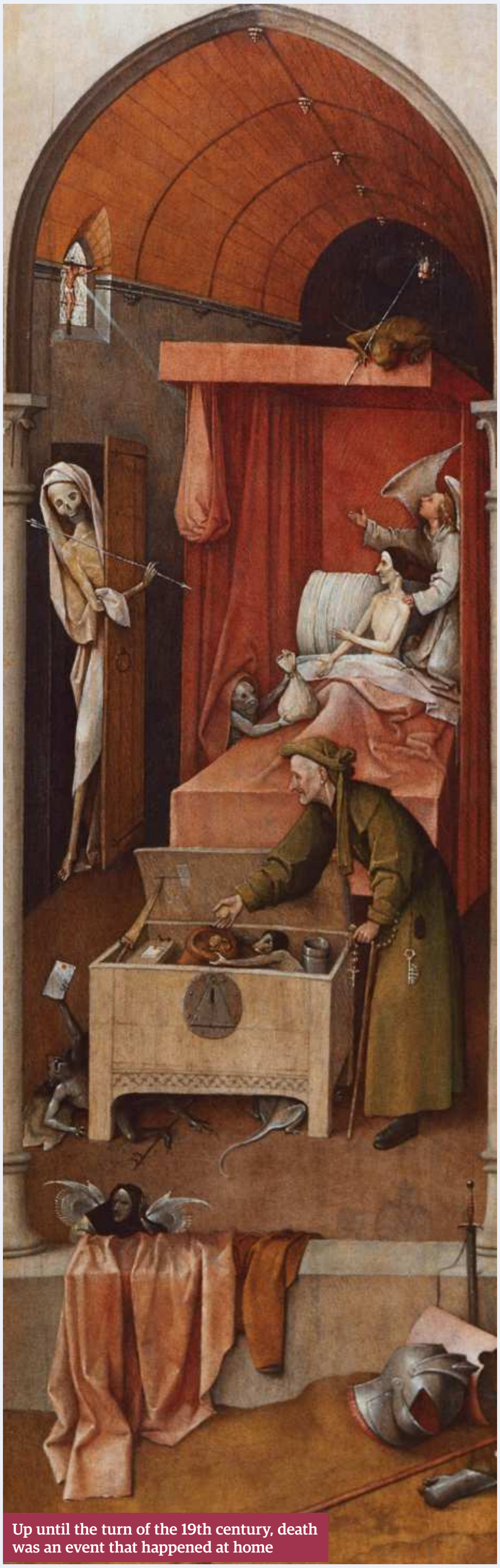
It's not exactly clear when our ancestors began to bury their dead. Some archeologists believe that Neanderthals buried their dead about 70,000 years ago, based on the presence of simple tools, rock circles and pollen that may indicate flowers. Other scholars are less sure these were deliberate placements. The earliest unambiguous evidence of burial comes with Homo sapiens across Europe and Northern Asia about 30,000 years ago. These hunter-gatherer dead were often buried with flexed legs or in the fetal position, with simple tools, food or jewellery, and often with red ocher sprinkled over their bodies. Some Stone Age humans also cremated their dead: the practice was common in Northern Europe and the Near East.

With the evolution of farming around 12,000 years ago and the rise of states in Egypt and Mesopotamia, mortuary rituals took on a new dimension. Scholars think tombs were part of how early pastoral settlements identified land as their own, and may have been places where they worshipped ancestors. The 9,000-year-old plaster-covered, shell-decorated skulls of Jericho - possibly the world's first city - are just one piece of evidence suggesting ancestor worship during this period. Social status also took on new significance, with magnificent burials for royalty and common burial in an unmarked grave for more ordinary folk.

Pastoral communities also developed new kinds of mortuary architecture. Early Ancient Romans who practised cremation placed the urns in subterranean brick structures called columbaria. Early Christians used catacombs - narrow, underground passageways cut into the soft volcanic rock, with shelves for bodies.

As Christianity took hold in the late 300s CE, the Christian dead were often buried in the floor or crypts of churches, or in land adjoining the church, with the hope that their souls might benefit in the afterlife. Eventually almost all Christian burials took place in churchyards,

The 'garden cemetery' movement of the 1800s meant romantic resting places featuring rolling hills, ornamental trees and shrubs



Up until the turn of the 19th century, death was an event that happened at home

a regime that would remain more or less unchanged for centuries.

It wasn't until churchyards grew full around the 1700s – and amid fears that the 'bad air' of crowded churchyards caused diseases like cholera – that modern cemeteries began. These were generally utilitarian burial places, often located on the fringe of cities to prevent contagion. But by the 1800s, a 'garden cemetery' movement had taken hold, with romantic resting places featuring rolling hills, ornamental trees and shrubs, and often grand memorials. Père Lachaise in Paris, opened in 1804, is often seen as the first garden cemetery, but similar cemeteries soon followed in Britain, America and elsewhere.

In the 19th century, advances in science brought major changes in the care of the dead. While Ancient Egyptians and other cultures had practised embalming, for centuries afterwards in the West it was seen as a pagan practice, suitable only for anatomists preparing specimens. In the 1830s, the invention of arterial embalming – replacing the body's blood with a preservative – encouraged a renaissance in the practice.

In the United States, attitudes to embalming changed with the Civil War, the first US war to make provisions for returning the dead to families. In 1861 the first Union officer killed in the war, Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, was embalmed by Thomas Holmes, a New York doctor and coroner's assistant often called the 'Father of Modern Embalming'. Ellsworth's preserved body lay in state in the White House, and was viewed by thousands in New York. After President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, his body was also embalmed for the long train trip back to Springfield, Illinois, and seen by more than a million people during stops on this journey. Events such as these served as major advertisements for embalming, which was especially helpful in the days before common refrigeration.

Widespread in the US by the 1880s, embalming became the key skill set for professional undertakers and encouraged the rise of funeral homes as a business. The once-traditional American set of practices – in which women washed and dressed the body, a local cabinetmaker prepared the coffin and the corpse was laid out in a home's front room for viewing – started to shift towards the professional, commercialised practices that are familiar to us now. And just as the dead increasingly started to be cared for in funeral homes, the dying soon moved to the hospital.

Like embalming, cremation was long viewed as a pagan practice. But as the 19th century progressed, cremation was increasingly seen as efficient and hygienic. The UK was a leader in these changing attitudes thanks to Queen Victoria's surgeon Sir Henry Thompson, who in 1874 founded the Cremation Society and published an influential book about the topic. Cremation was ruled legal in Britain ten years later, and soon found favour on both sides of the Atlantic. More than 75% of the UK dead are now cremated. The practice has taken longer to catch on in the US, where cremation rates vary widely state by state, but now averages at around half the country's dead.

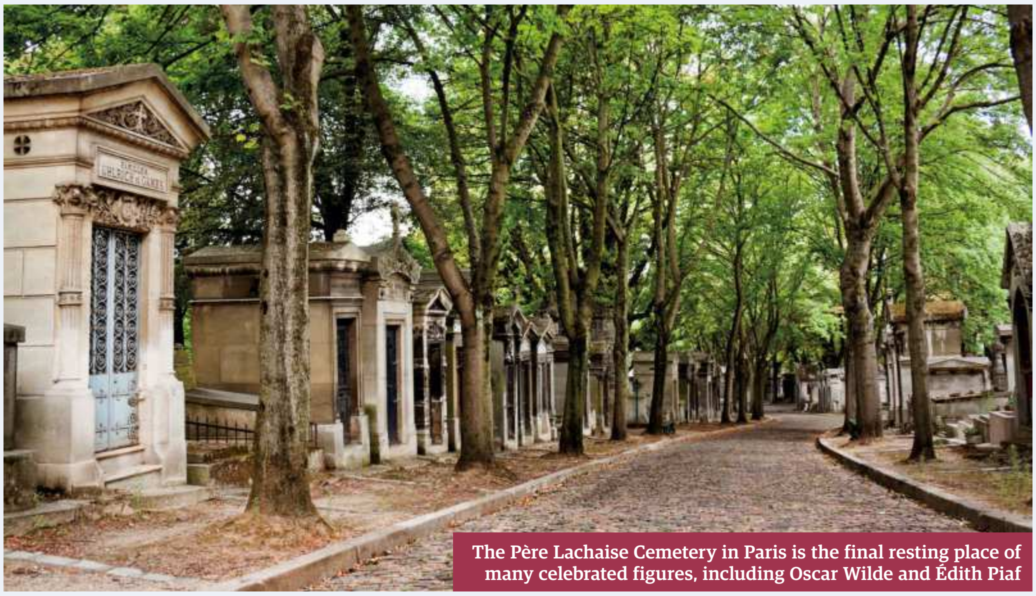
Modern cremation takes about 90 minutes in a crematorium's furnace and reduces bodies to fragments of bones, which are then mechanically pulverised to produce about 3 to 9 pounds of remains. While some ashes are placed in a columbarium or buried in a cemetery, other families chose to scatter ashes in places of personal significance to the deceased, with varying degrees of legality. In the US, Disneyland is said to be a particularly popular place for scattering ashes, much to the chagrin of management.

> "In the US, Disneyland is a particularly popular place for scattering ashes"

The rise of cremation has also encouraged a number of more boutique forms of disposal. In the United States, a company called Celestis will send ashes to space, a practice known as space burial. One Celestis service flies cremated remains into space and then returns them to loved ones as keepsakes, while other offerings send the ashes into orbit around the Earth, land them on the Moon, or carry them into deep space. *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry is the most famous person to have received a space burial – his ashes were carried on the Space Shuttle Columbia in 1992 and on the first private Celestis space burial in 1997.

Families can also send their loved ones' ashes into the depths of the ocean. Companies like the Florida-based Eternal Reefs mix the ashes of the deceased with concrete into large 'reef ball' formations that act as a habitat for life on the ocean floor. Other companies promise to be able to turn cremated remains into diamonds, by extracting the carbon, purifying it, and growing the diamonds in a lab. Families or friends can also have ashes incorporated into fireworks, mixed into tattoo ink, added to glass art or sculpture, and even pressed into a vinyl record.

Mourning garb became popular under the reign of Queen Victoria



The Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris is the final resting place of many celebrated figures, including Oscar Wilde and Édith Piaf

A Glossary of Death

Words to know when it comes to the end

Autopsy

Examination of a corpse to determine cause of death. From the Greek autopsia, meaning 'a seeing with one's own eyes'.

Casket

A rectangular burial container for a body. Originally a 'small box for jewels, etc'.

Cemetery

A place where bodies are buried in the earth. Early Christian writers coined the term as a euphemism, from the Greek koimeterion, 'sleeping place, dormitory'.

Coffin

A chest or box for a body, sometimes in the traditional wedge shape. From the Greek kophinos, 'a basket'.

Columbarium

A structure with recessed niches for urns holding cremated remains. Derived from the Latin columba, meaning 'dove' (the word originally referred to a dovecote).

Crypt

A vault or chamber in which a dead body is placed. Traditionally beneath a church, although may also be used to refer to drawers in mausoleums.

Epitaph

An inscription on a grave or tombstone.

Inhumation

Burial in the ground.

Mausoleum

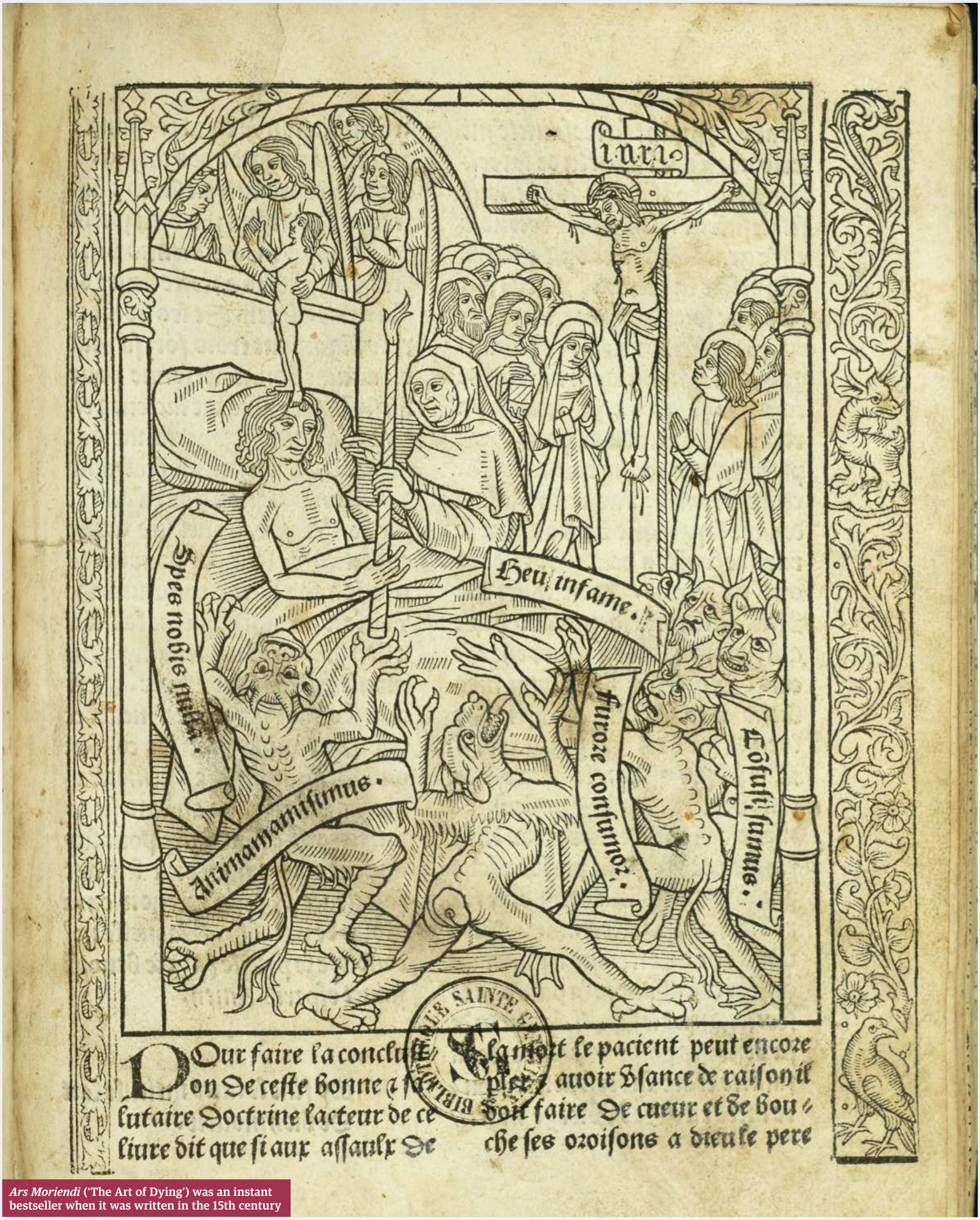
A large tomb above ground. Named after King Mausolus of Caria, who had an elaborate tomb at Halicarnassus around 350 BCE.

Morgue

A place where corpses are kept until claimed.

Sarcophagus

A stone coffin. The stone was believed to eat the corpse, so the term comes from the Greek sarkos ('flesh') and phagos ('I eat').


inri
Spes nobis nulla.
Heu infame.
Animam amiſimus.
Furore conſumor.
Cõfuſi ſumus.

Pour faire la concluſion de ceſte bonne & ſalutaire doctrine lacteur de ce liure dit que ſi aux aſſaulx de la mort le pacient peut encore plus auoir vſance de raiſon il doit faire de cueur et de bouche ſes oroiſons a dieu le pere

BIBLIOTHEQUE SAINTE

Ars Moriendi ('The Art of Dying') was an instant bestseller when it was written in the 15th century

Eternal Reefs creates artificial reefs with cremated remains

Green Burial And New Greener Technologies

Traditional embalming, burial and cremation can be surprisingly toxic and resource-intensive. In the United States, casket manufacturing uses up 2,700 tons of bronze and copper annually, plus 100,000 tons of steel and 30 million board feet of lumber. Traditional embalming also uses carcinogenic formaldehyde derivatives, which can poison embalmers and the ground alike. Cremation is less resource-heavy than most burials, but still uses as much gas and electricity as a 500-mile road trip and releases an average 400kg (882lb) of CO_2 into the atmosphere for every corpse, plus vaporised mercury from teeth fillings and other toxins.

Since the 1970s, activists have called for a more environmentally conscious approach to death. In green burial, there is no embalming, no concrete vault, and only organic, biodegradable materials in the grave. The idea is to encourage decomposition and returning of the body to the earth, rather than to fight it. Burials are often in land specially set aside and may have a conservation component, so that forests, meadows, or other ecologically rich areas are protected in perpetuity.

Green funeral advocates also often espouse home funerals, which use techniques such as dry ice to keep the body cool and generally involve bathing, dressing and saying goodbye to the body at home. Contrary to popular belief, this is perfectly legal in many parts of the world.

New technologies have also brought environmentally aware death care into the 21st century. Alkaline hydrolysis (also called resomation or aquamation) uses an alkaline solution and heat to reduce a body to fragments of bone, similar to the end result of cremation. The energy used is about 10% that of fire-based cremations, without any smoke polluting the atmosphere. As of the end of 2019, the process was legal in the UK and 19 US states.

The newest form of bodily disposition is recomposition or natural organic reduction, also sometimes called human composting. The process involves a reusable vessel in which the body is covered with a layer of wood chips and other organic material, after which warm air is applied. After 30 days bacteria breaks the corpse down into about a cubic yard of nutrient-rich mulch, which can be used in gardens or donated to a land trust. Recomposition was legalised in Washington state in 2019, with bills in other US states pending at the time of writing.

Other forms of new death technology are currently being developed, and it seems likely at least some 21st-century corpses will be treated in ways unfamiliar to their ancestors - even if the end results (ashes or soil) are much the same as they've always been.

The Evolution Of Western Attitudes To Death

Because we don't know what our hunter-gatherer ancestors believed, we can only guess at the meanings behind humanity's earliest death practices. In *A Social History Of Dying*, sociologist Allan Kellehear argues that based on the evidence from grave goods, cave art and the beliefs of today's hunter-gatherer tribes, it's likely that prehistoric dying was considered a long, otherworldly journey that only began with biological death. This journey was fraught with peril, involving many tasks that needed to be performed by the survivors as well as by the deceased. Only with great luck, skill and generous provisions would the dead 'survive' and reach a land where their identity continued in some way; otherwise, extinction and 'true death' were assured.

Farming lifestyles brought new causes of death. Infectious diseases and famine became far more common, in contrast to the sudden accidents and violence that had led to many prehistoric demises. With these slower forms of death, the dying now had more time to prepare for their departure. According to Kellehear, dying now became more of a this-world journey rather than an otherworldly expedition. People started being more interested in the signs of disease and death, in omens in dreams and animals, and in the deathbed visions that had become common for European peasants.

By the Middle Ages, ideas of the 'good death' had started to emerge in Europe. This set of ideas and practices encouraged a well-ordered, well-prepared-for dying in which those on their deathbed performed spiritual tasks, made a will, settled any lingering business, and died (hopefully) at home surrounded by family and friends. Best-selling texts like the *Ars Moriendi* ('The Art Of Dying') of the 15th century showed how friends, family and the dying should conduct themselves at the deathbed and exactly what prayers to say.

As the Middle Ages progressed, the rise of cities encouraged new professional classes and increasing occupational specialisation. Particularly for the wealthy, but then for everybody, care of the dead shifted from family and community to involve priests, doctors and lawyers. Early fraternal organisations also guaranteed their members access to hospitals, clergy and other services, becoming the forerunners of today's insurance companies. Dying slowly became a more individualised process, involving questions of choice and control - seeking pain management, dividing one's estate, managing complex family situations and more. Dying also became increasingly private and sequestered.

According to Kellehear, wealthy and middle-class Europeans in cities became less fatalistic about death compared to their ancestors and more focused on problem-solving and seeking professional resources. The good death thus became the managed death. This legacy informs how many in the West approach death today.

Death As Taboo – And Why Talking About Death Might Be Good For You

In the 19th century, many Western death rituals were elaborate and sentimental. Families who could afford it would hold grand funerals, cover the house in black crepe, dress exclusively in mourning wear (often for months or years), and create keepsakes with stands of their loved ones' hair. But after these demonstrative rituals were rendered less appealing - and practical - by the mass death of the World War I and 1918 flu pandemic, a new emotional reserve took hold, in which real death was increasingly considered unfit for public discussion. British social anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer famously wrote of the "pornography of death," declaring that by the mid-20th century in Britain, death had replaced sex as a taboo topic.

Other anthropologists don't feel that death meets the criteria of a true taboo (like, say, incest) but that we have created a society distanced from death. Whereas many in the West once grew up on farms, familiar with death, most now live in cities, where our meat arrives shrinkwrapped and real death is usually the preserve of hospitals and funeral homes. Our distance from death also appears in the euphemistic language that's considered polite, in which the deceased are said to have "passed on" or are "no longer with us". In a 2016 analysis of Legacy.com obituaries, "passed away" was used in 32.5% of death notices. Other common euphemisms included "left this world", "slipped away", "succumbed", "entered eternal rest" and "went home".

> "Death Cafes encourage open-ended explorations of mortality around tea and cake"

Although death is a part of life just as much as birth, many of us fear it, and have developed protective mechanisms like these euphemisms to shield ourselves from it. In fact, a school of thought known as Terror Management Theory argues that much of human culture is developed as a response to the fear of death. Mortality makes people so uncomfortable they try to repress it, the theory goes, and when that inevitably fails, they focus on status-seeking, self-esteem boosting or cultural works that will provide some form of immortality. They may also resort to acts of nationalism or war, which reinforce their own cultural belief systems at the expense of others. Studies have shown that being reminded of death can harden prejudices, reinforce jingoistic political beliefs and increase materialism.

Yet emerging research has also shown that death awareness can contribute to personal growth, encourage more fulfilling relationships and remind people to take better care of their health, among other benefits. Initiatives such as Death Cafes - started in the UK in 2011 and now international - encourage open-ended explorations of mortality around tea and cake, helping people to confront their fears. Other initiatives, including Death Over Dinner and the Conversation Project, also encourage discussions about death and end-of-life care. Discussing death not only enhances one's appreciation for life, advocates say, but it can also help individuals and families be better prepared, in a real practical sense, for facing the inevitable.

In Search of The Good Death

We speak to Sarah Chavez, executive director of the Order of the Good Death, about the Death Positive movement, how it began, and why you might want to engage with death in the first place

How would you define the death positive movement?

Similar to the Sex Positive Movement, the Death Positive movement acknowledges that death is a normal part of life, and that engaging with death demonstrates a natural curiosity about the human condition. For me, the paramount tenet of the movement is that both the laws which govern death, and quality end-of-life care, should not only be accessible to all, but ensure that each individual's identity and wishes are honoured regardless of their sexuality, gender, race, disability or religion.

How did it start?

There were a number of things that happened over a few years that contributed to the beginnings of the movement starting in 2011. These were the emergence of Death Cafes, a growing interest in home funerals, green burial and the work of 'death doulas', people who take on a supportive role at the deathbed – a practice that has been an important tradition among many cultures for centuries. 2011 was also the year that The Order of the Good Death was founded, and the popular web series *Ask A Mortician* launched, created by host Caitlin Doughty. She first proposed the term 'Death Positive' in a tweet in 2013.

Soon after, the success of books like Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal*, and Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air*, as well as the start of Death Salon gatherings, and the crucial issues brought to national attention by the Black Lives Matter movement, all demonstrated the urgent need for people to discuss death and dying as a whole, but also specifically the ways systemic racism impacts the death and mourning experiences of Black, Indigenous, and other marginalised people. The unfortunate truth is, we are not all equal in death.

Are there historical forerunners for the movement?

Yes, there were quite a few that emerged in the 1970s and '80s, such as the Natural Death Movement and the Death Acceptance Movement. Also, social movements and activism surrounding the AIDS epidemic, and activists in the Chicano rights movement who utilised Dia de Muertos (Day of the Dead) imagery and practices as a form of protest and resistance in the '70s.

What advice would you give to someone who finds the idea of death too awful to even contemplate?

Engaging with death in safe, controllable ways can alleviate your fear and anxiety. Think of what it feels like when we are prepared for a test as opposed to being entirely unprepared and have no understanding of the subject matter. How can we make important decisions, or support the people we love when they need it most if we don't know how?

Studies have shown that thinking about death can actually help you live a happier life. When we become actively aware that our time is finite this prompts us to prioritise the things and people that are most important to us, and help us let go of the things that are not.

If you want to learn more about The Order of the Good Death and the Death Positive movement, visit www.orderofthegooddeath.com

In The Court of King Death

Death is life's non-negotiable – religion is the human half of the contract

Written by Edoardo Albert

We know we are going to die. The knowledge of our own mortality sits alongside language as one of the key features that sets humanity apart from the rest of the animal world. That knowledge appears to have existed from our beginning (there is some evidence that our close cousins, Neanderthal man, also buried their dead, although the evidence is a little shaky) and it shapes some of the oldest evidence we have for human culture. We cared for, and feared, the dead from the start.

Hunting Death

For the majority of human existence, we were hunters and gatherers, nomads following a peripatetic path through forest and jungles, across steppes and savannahs, tracking prey animals and timing our arrival at camp sites to match the fruiting of local trees and shrubs or the running of fish. It's about as far from our experience nowadays as it's possible to get and a lifestyle that leaves very little in the way of archaeological traces, apart from the flint that formed the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic tool kit. But anthropologists have studied hunter gatherer societies that have endured into the modern era and, assuming that there is a commonality between existing hunter gatherers and those of the past, we can see a marked difference between their beliefs about death and the beliefs of the first farmers. For the hunters of animals, death is the result of actions and the presence of death in the world is itself an action brought about by magic in its various forms. The dominant attitude of these earliest humans towards their own dead was fear: fear of the unquiet dead returning to wreak revenge and malice upon the living. The fear of the unquiet dead remained, and remains, a fundamental part of death rites around the world, cropping up in all sorts of new guises through the centuries, the wave of vampire and zombie books and films in recent years being just the latest iteration of this oldest of human dreads.

Death is life's non-negotiable

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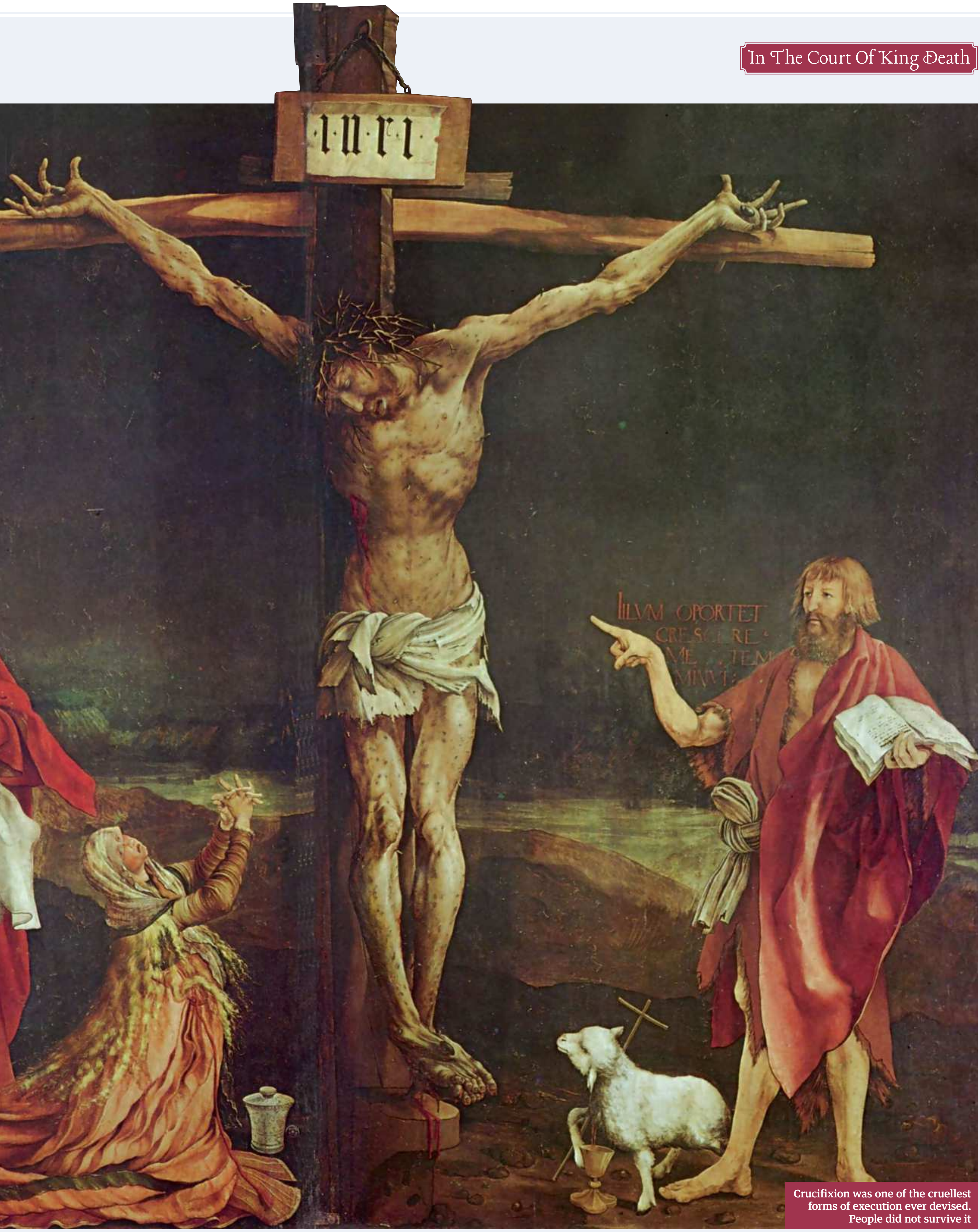
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Crucifixion was one of the cruellest forms of execution ever devised. People did not survive it

©GL Archive/Alamy

The greater part of human history involved men and women wandering the land with no fixed homes, hunting and gathering where they might

©David Lyons/Alamy

To stop the dead roaming, the funerary rites of the early hunters and their modern-day remnants generally involved methods to ensure that the spirit of the dead person remained with its body. People were buried bound up with ropes, or tied with nets, sealed into the ground under mounds of stones, or interred with their mouths, eyes and ears covered up so that the spirit could not escape back into the world of the living. For example, when a member of the Aranda tribe (one of the indigenous tribes of Australia) died, the temporary settlement where the death occurred was burned, the dead man's name was no longer spoken, his wife and relatives had to undergo painful rites to ensure that the spirit of the dead man was assured that his passing had been properly lamented, and finally there was a riotous dance over the grave itself, with shouting, ground beating and much noise and commotion so the spirit of the dead man knew not to pass that way again and frighten his family. However, the spirits of the dead were still welcome to appear to their kin in dreams and to guard them from evil.

Thus the hunting peoples of our past sought to maintain the wall between the living and the dead, keeping each in their proper realm. The shaman priests of the hunting tribes went on dream journeys into the 'otherworld' that was both afterlife and before life, the home and source of the animals upon which the tribe depended for its own survival, with the animal totem of the tribe the source of people and beasts. Attitudes to death and its accompanying rituals changed dramatically, however, with the adoption of agriculture.

Sowing Death, Reaping New Life

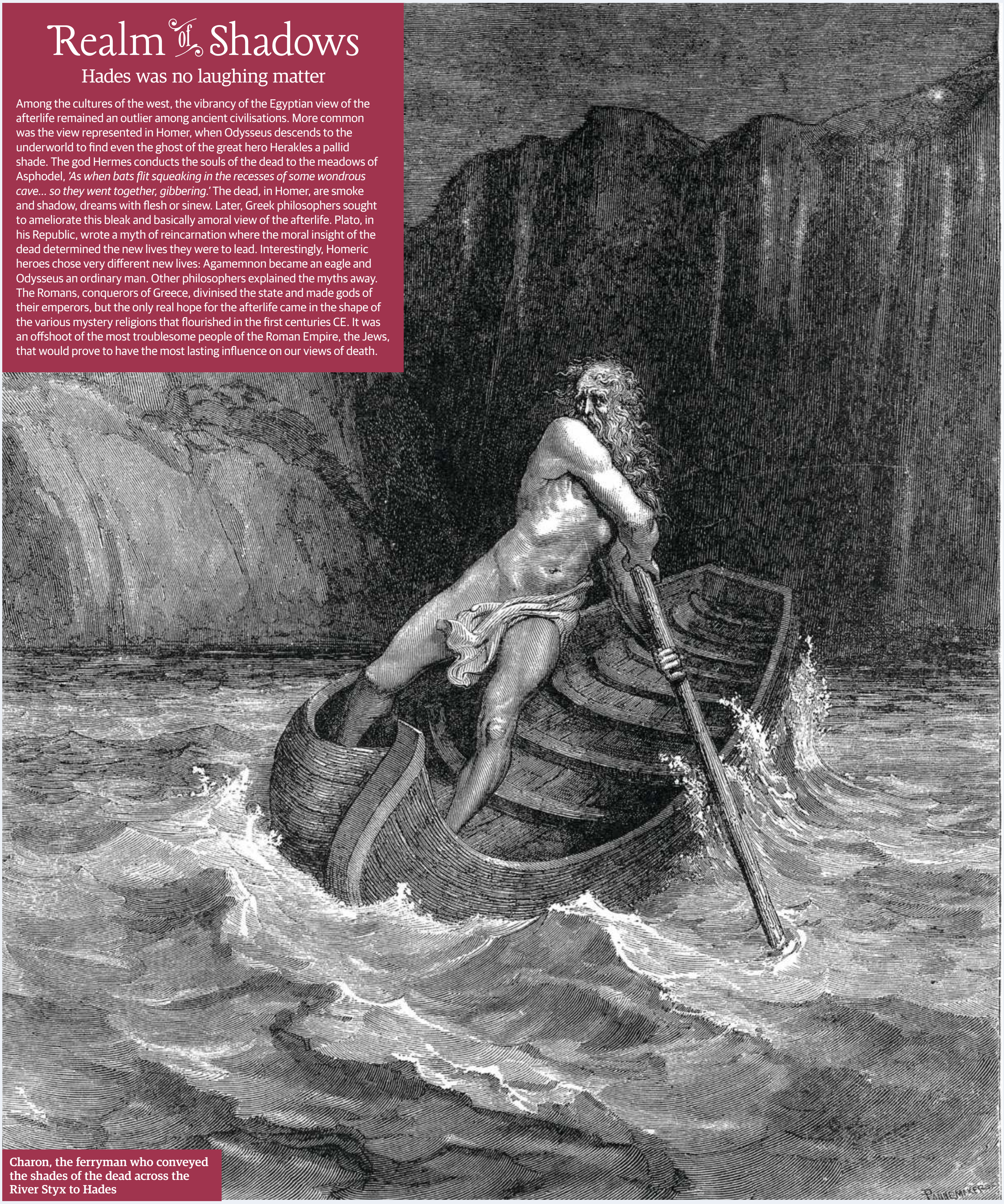
Where a hunter kills, a farmer sows, burying seed in the ground - killing it, in effect - only for new life to grow. It is not surprising that such a fundamental shift in how people subsisted should bring a major change in the myths and rituals of death. Among those changes was a deepening and greater emphasis upon the dead, both the newly deceased and the ancestral dead, as part of a wider community that encompassed the living too. While the details obviously varied across cultures, a typical death ritual would see the corpse interred for a period but then the skull exhumed, decorated and returned to its place among the living, where it was kept among the skulls of the other ancestors in full view of the living. The physical remains of the dead were given offerings of food and drink, and included in all the major decisions of the family and clan. In some regions, where conditions allowed, the dead body might be left to dry out naturally and then brought in to take its place by the hearth in its entirety. This was the ritual in its gentlest form. But given the key insight of the first agriculturalists - that something must die that new life spring forth - there were also rather more gruesome rituals of sacrifice. One example occurred among the Marind-anim of New Guinea. During the ritual accompanying boys' puberty rites, the village descended into a sexual orgy lasting for several days accompanied by chants, drums and bullroarers, apart from the boys who were on the verge of manhood. On the final night, a young girl, usually the best and most beautiful in the village, was painted, oiled and arrayed in ceremonial finery before being taken and lain beneath a platform piled high with heavy logs. Then the boys who were being initiated into

> "The physical remains of the dead were included in all the major decisions of the family and clan"

Realm of Shadows

Hades was no laughing matter

Among the cultures of the west, the vibrancy of the Egyptian view of the afterlife remained an outlier among ancient civilisations. More common was the view represented in Homer, when Odysseus descends to the underworld to find even the ghost of the great hero Herakles a pallid shade. The god Hermes conducts the souls of the dead to the meadows of Asphodel, *'As when bats flit squeaking in the recesses of some wondrous cave... so they went together, gibbering.'* The dead, in Homer, are smoke and shadow, dreams with flesh or sinew. Later, Greek philosophers sought to ameliorate this bleak and basically amoral view of the afterlife. Plato, in his Republic, wrote a myth of reincarnation where the moral insight of the dead determined the new lives they were to lead. Interestingly, Homeric heroes chose very different new lives: Agamemnon became an eagle and Odysseus an ordinary man. Other philosophers explained the myths away. The Romans, conquerors of Greece, divinised the state and made gods of their emperors, but the only real hope for the afterlife came in the shape of the various mystery religions that flourished in the first centuries CE. It was an offshoot of the most troublesome people of the Roman Empire, the Jews, that would prove to have the most lasting influence on our views of death.



Charon, the ferryman who conveyed the shades of the dead across the River Styx to Hades

©Universal Images

Men of the Marind-anim dressed for ritual

manhood were enjoined to copulate with the girl one after the other until the final boy lay with her. Then the supports holding up the platform were pulled away and the heavy logs crashed down, crushing the two young people. The dead couple were then pulled free, cooked and eaten.

Such rites of sacrifice signalled the understanding of these first horticulturalists of the intimate link between death, sex and the natural world upon which they depended. But when the first great civilisations arose in the fertile land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, and then along the River Nile, the great insight they applied to their understanding of death came from the sky.

Cities Of Night

With our lives bathed in artificial light, it's almost impossible for us to understand how powerful, how overwhelming the night sky was to people whose only source of light was fire. But when the first cities were founded, cities such as Eridu, Uruk and Ur, they developed with the slowly accumulating knowledge of the regular movement of the planets, the sun and the moon against the backdrop of the fixed stars. These first city dwellers, looking up at the sky, developed the art of counting based upon the ten fingers of the hand – hence the decimal system of everyday calculation – and the 360 days of the year, which is why there are 360 degrees in a circle (the additional five days of the year were set aside as festival days when the sacred met the earthly). Looking up, priest astronomers developed the calendar and, looking out, produced a civilisation that sought to mirror the regular dance of the heavens in the regular rituals of priest and king. But there was not much hope in the afterlife. One of the earliest myths to survive tells of the descent of Ishtar, goddess of war and sexual love, to the Underworld, which was ruled by her sister Ereshkigal. In 'the land of no return'...

Those who enter here have no more light.
Dust and clay is what they have to eat.
They are dressed like birds, clothed with wings.
Dust is spread over the door and over the bolts.

With Ishtar trapped in the Underworld by the machinations of her sister...

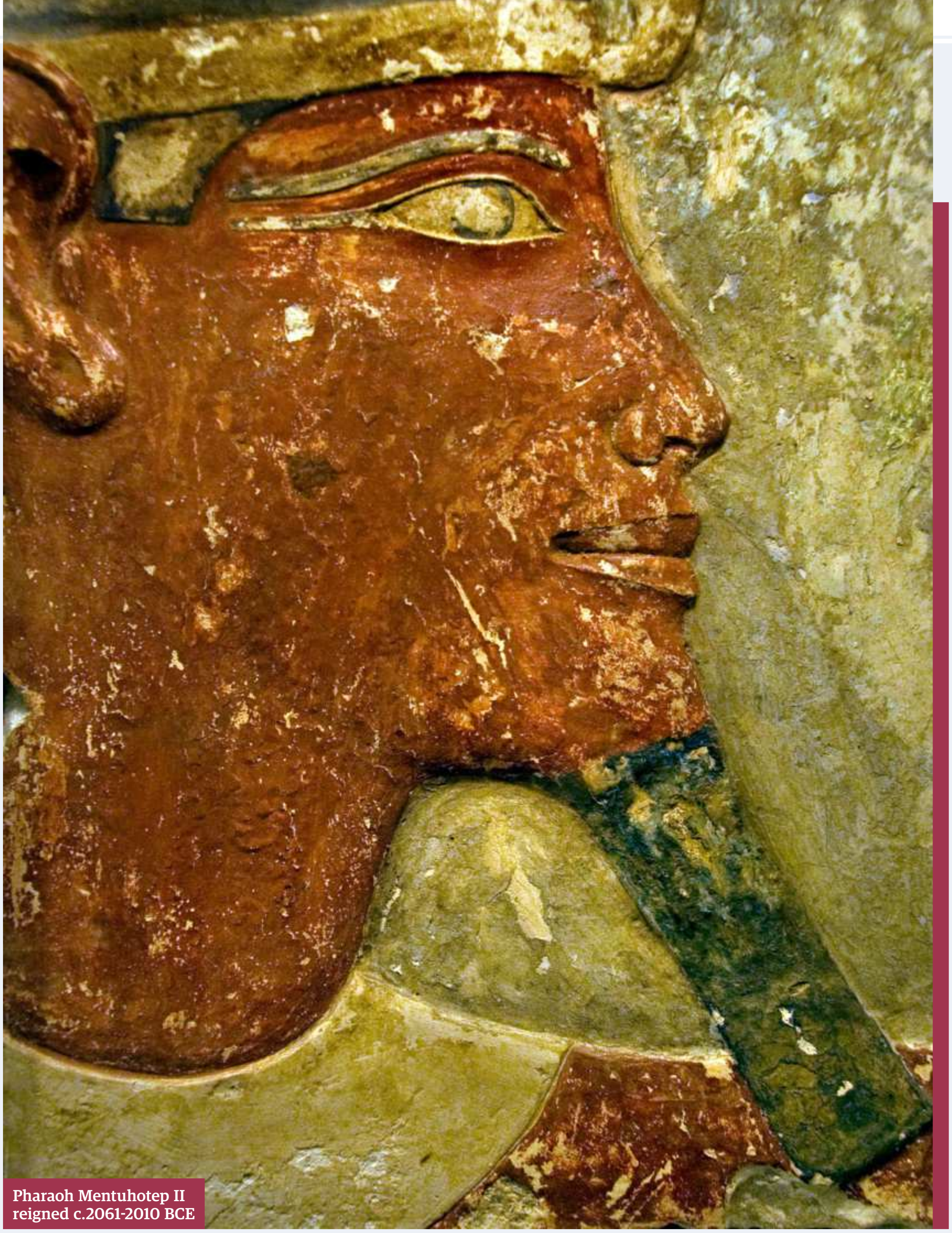
The bull no longer springs upon the cow.
The ass no longer covers his mate,
The man in the street no longer joins the maid.

With love dead, the gods had no choice but to rescue Ishtar, giving Ereshkigal a eunuch as substitute for Ishtar. This bleak view of the afterlife was by no means unique to Mesopotamia, but it was not one shared by the other great culture of the ancient world: Egypt.

"To avoid destruction, the dead man had to affirm that his soul was pure"

Feeding The Dead

The Pyramids tell the story, in enduring stone, of the Egyptian conquest of death. Unlike many other ancient civilisations, the Egyptians believed that the afterlife was not necessarily grim – particularly if you were top of the tree in this life. At first, the dead were simply buried in the sand and left to dry out before being removed, but as the rich and the royal had tombs built for the dead, the process of mummification was developed as the Egyptians believed that there remained an intimate connection between the immortal and mortal elements of a man. By the time of the Old Kingdom (c.2686-2181 BCE), it was recognised that the living had to provide for the dead, with daily offerings left at the tomb to sustain the dead in the afterlife. Maintaining such offerings proved difficult over the generations, so they were eventually replaced by scenes painted on the walls, including a menu for the dead and small models of servants to help and care for



Pharaoh Mentuhotep II reigned c.2061-2010 BCE

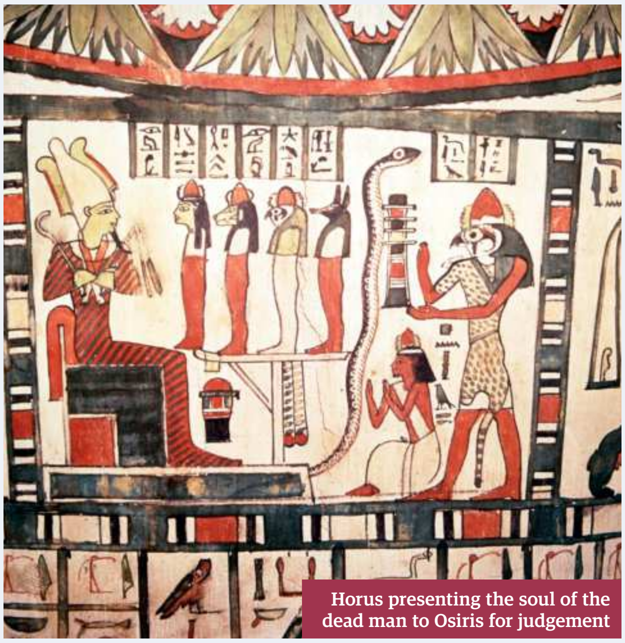
©Peter Horree/Alamy

The World's Oldest Ghost Story

An Egyptian tale of the unquiet dead from 4,000 years ago

In the tale, found on four pieces of ostraca (inscribed pottery) around Deir el-Medina, Khonsemhab, a high priest of the god Amun, is visited by a restless ghost named Nebusemekh, who laments to the priest that his tomb has fallen into ruin, that no one brings him food any longer and that, if this continues, he will cease to exist for his soul no longer has a dwelling place. Khonsemhab asks the ghost who he was and Nebusemekh tells him that he had been in charge of the treasury of Pharaoh Mentuhotep and a lieutenant in his army. Dying in the 14th year of his reign, the pharaoh had provided his faithful servant with all the necessities for the afterlife, but now the care due to him has withered away and he is withering too. The priest assures the ghost that he will see to the care of his tomb but Nebusemekh is dubious – he thinks the priest simply doesn't have the money to build him a new tomb or to supply enough victuals to sustain him. Khonsemhab sends men out to search for the tomb and they return with news of its whereabouts. Khonsemhab rejoices, calling an official to tell him what he has found. Unfortunately, the end of the story is lost – although there is hope that another piece of ostraca may be unearthed with the ending – but experts believe that Khonsemhab goes to the ruined tomb to tell the ghost that he will soon have a new home.

A sky burial at the burial grounds of Drigung Monastery, Tibet



Horus presenting the soul of the dead man to Osiris for judgement

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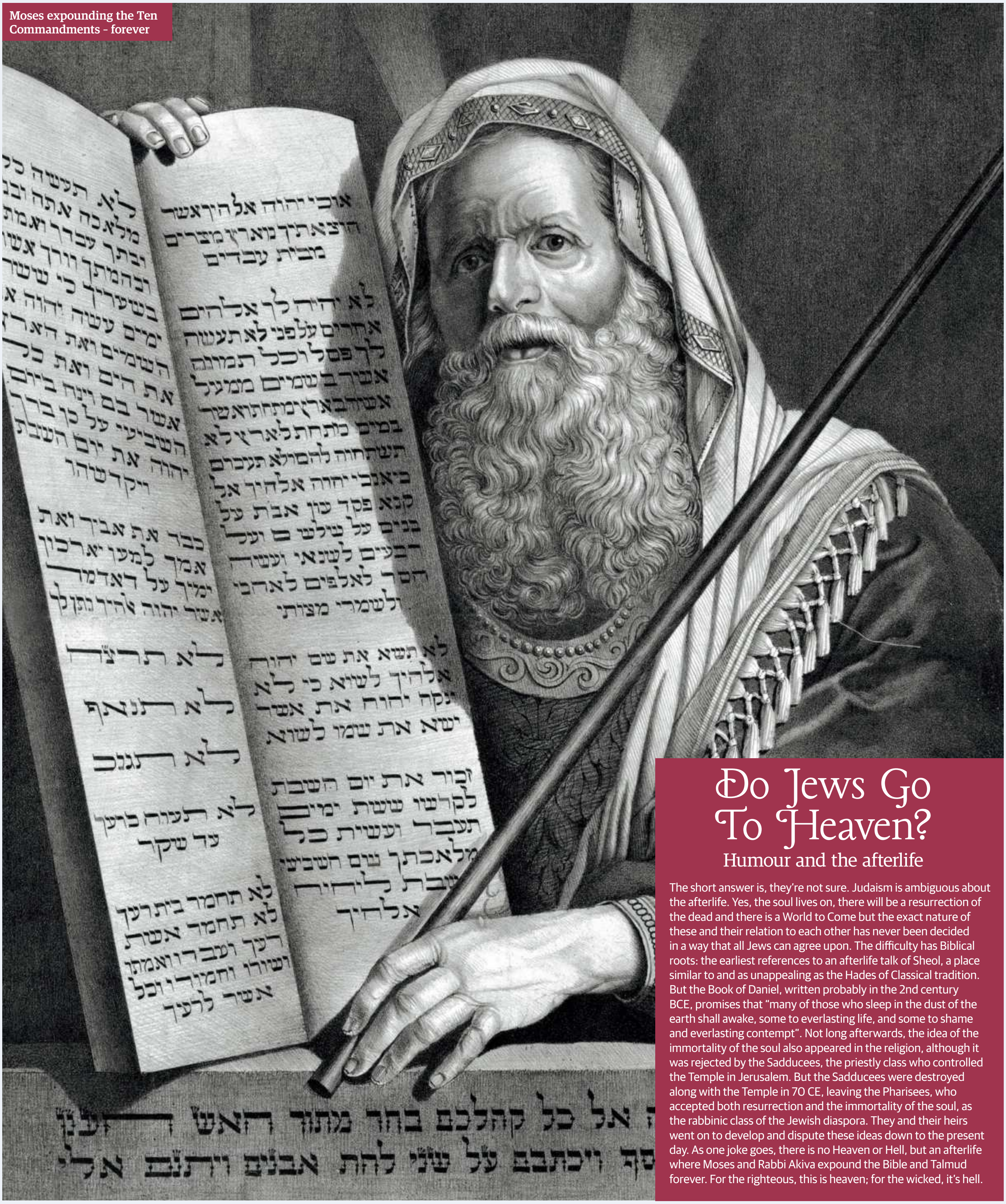

Moses expounding the Ten Commandments - forever

©Keith Lance/Getty

Do Jews Go To Heaven?

Humour and the afterlife

The short answer is, they're not sure. Judaism is ambiguous about the afterlife. Yes, the soul lives on, there will be a resurrection of the dead and there is a World to Come but the exact nature of these and their relation to each other has never been decided in a way that all Jews can agree upon. The difficulty has Biblical roots: the earliest references to an afterlife talk of Sheol, a place similar to and as unappealing as the Hades of Classical tradition. But the Book of Daniel, written probably in the 2nd century BCE, promises that "many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt". Not long afterwards, the idea of the immortality of the soul also appeared in the religion, although it was rejected by the Sadducees, the priestly class who controlled the Temple in Jerusalem. But the Sadducees were destroyed along with the Temple in 70 CE, leaving the Pharisees, who accepted both resurrection and the immortality of the soul, as the rabbinic class of the Jewish diaspora. They and their heirs went on to develop and dispute these ideas down to the present day. As one joke goes, there is no Heaven or Hell, but an afterlife where Moses and Rabbi Akiva expound the Bible and Talmud forever. For the righteous, this is heaven; for the wicked, it's hell.

A Sikh elder studies the *Guru Granth Sahib* in the Bangkok Gurdwara

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“In the earliest myths, the gods were mortal, relying on an elixir to gain immortality”

the deceased. As for the spirit of the dead man or woman, it had to stand for judgement before Osiris, god of the underworld, and 42 assessors of his life. To avoid destruction, the dead man had to affirm that his soul was pure and that he had committed no serious sins during his life (if he had, he could still try to trick the gods into believing he was innocent). Then the man’s heart was put into one pan of a set of scales and a feather in the other. So long as the scales balanced, then the man was innocent, the god Thoth recorded the verdict, and the immortal spirit passed into the keeping of Osiris. Those who failed the test were consumed by the demon Ammit and utterly destroyed.

Death In The East

Around 1500 BCE, an Indo-Aryan people moved into the area of the Indus valley, destroying the existing Mohenjo Daro civilisation and replacing it with their own pantheon of warrior gods, the ancient hymns in their praise collected in the *Rig Veda*, one of the four sacred texts of Hinduism. In these earliest myths, the gods themselves were mortal, relying upon Soma, an elixir, to gain immortality. But unlike other polytheistic pantheons, the gods of India did not wither under the scrutiny of sages and scholars. Instead, from about the 5th century BCE, the myths broadened, the teachings deepened and the gods shifted in importance. So Indra, the chief of the gods in the *Rig Veda*, declined in importance as Vishnu and Shiva became paramount and sages explained the monotheism underlying the dizzying polytheism of popular religion (one early European visitor remarked, “Here there are more gods than men”). This development occurred as Buddhism rose and flourished in India, most probably in response to the teachings of the Buddha and his followers.

Perhaps the key doctrines shared, although understood in different ways, by the two religions, and their cousin, Jainism, is karma and its consequence, Saṃsāra, the cycle of birth and rebirth. Death, in that case, is very far from the end for each soul. The soul, atman, is viewed as being part of Brahman, the underlying divine unity behind the illusion of everyday change, and the soul is born again into a new life, the length and circumstances of that new life being determined by the actions - the karma - of this present life. In Hinduism, as in the other religions of the subcontinent, people reap precisely what they sow. Rebirth is not confined to this world either, but can occur in heavens or hells; in all cases, though, even in the highest heaven or lowest hell, the soul’s placement there will not be eternal, for it is strapped upon the turning wheel of Saṃsāra. Thus, for a devout Hindu, the aim at death is not rebirth into a better life but moksha, deliverance from this cycle. As death approaches, the dying man will try to make his last outbreath the sacred syllable, Om: should it be his last breath then moksha will be his. At the end, the relatives of the dying person will move him or her on to the ground, for a Hindu should not die in bed. The dead body is generally cremated, Agni, the god of fire, destroying the mortal remains and freeing the atman, the soul, to continue its way on the wheel of birth. The rites that attend and follow the cremation of the dead are also designed to ensure a good rebirth for the departed soul, as well as making sure that it does not return as a bhuta, a malignant ghost (showing the continuing fear of the unquiet dead). After a year, the departed soul stands before the judgement seat of Yama, the god of death, and is given a term in heaven or hell depending on its lifetime actions before it is reborn again in some new form.

The Middle Way And The Last Guru

All life is suffering. The first of Buddhism’s four noble truths indicates the problem. The fourth, the eightfold path put before his disciples by the Buddha, is the way to escape this suffering. And since Buddhism accepts, with Hinduism and Jainism, the eternal cycle of Saṃsāra, then the only way from being broken, again and again, on the wheel is by getting off: nirvana. In Sri Lanka and Buddhist nations following the Theravada tradition, the dead soul is said to come before King Yama - as in Hinduism the deity of death - but in the Buddhist tradition Yama is not a judge but a sympathetic questioner who seeks to remind the dead person of any good deeds that they might have forgotten. One story tells how a wicked minister, standing before Yama, could not recall a single good deed until Yama reminded him that he had made an offering of jasmine flowers to the Jetavanaramaya stupa in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, giving the merit of this action to Yama. This good deed, solitary though it was, was sufficient to earn the minister rebirth in heaven. Within the Mahayana tradition, the Tibetans traditionally practise sky burial, where the corpse, now simply flesh as the soul has departed, is left exposed to be consumed by vultures and other wild creatures, an act of generosity to other living things.

The final major religion to develop within the Indian worldview, Sikhism shares the belief in the cycle of rebirth that are part of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. As with these religions, the final aim of the believer is deliverance, mukti, from this cycle. Guidance to achieve deliverance is given by the last guru, although in the case of Sikhism this is a book, not a man: the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The *Guru Granth Sahib* tells what happens when a person lies dying, with their final thoughts determining the nature of their rebirth, so that anyone who dies thinking of money is reincarnated as a snake, while someone who dies thinking of their home comes back as a homeless ghost. But those who die thinking of their Lord are freed from the cycle of rebirth and the yellow-robed Lord lives forevermore in their hearts.

The Prophet And The Grave

Submission. Islam means 'submission'. God's will is paramount and inviolable, He knows when a person will die and there is no escape. Muslims aim to die saying the Shahada, the declaration of faith, and if they are incapable of speaking then one of the gathered relatives will whisper the words into the dying person's ear, so it may be the last words they hear. After death, most Muslims believe that the soul remains with the body in the grave, being questioned by the angels Munkar and Nakir. For those who answer truly and well, the grave will seem a first taste of paradise but for the wicked it will be a foretaste of the torments to come. For on the Day of Judgement God will raise all the dead from their tombs, calling the righteous to heaven and sending the wicked to hell. Thus the dead are buried with their feet pointing towards Mecca so that when they rise from the grave they will be facing the Holy City whence the call came.

The Conquest Of Death

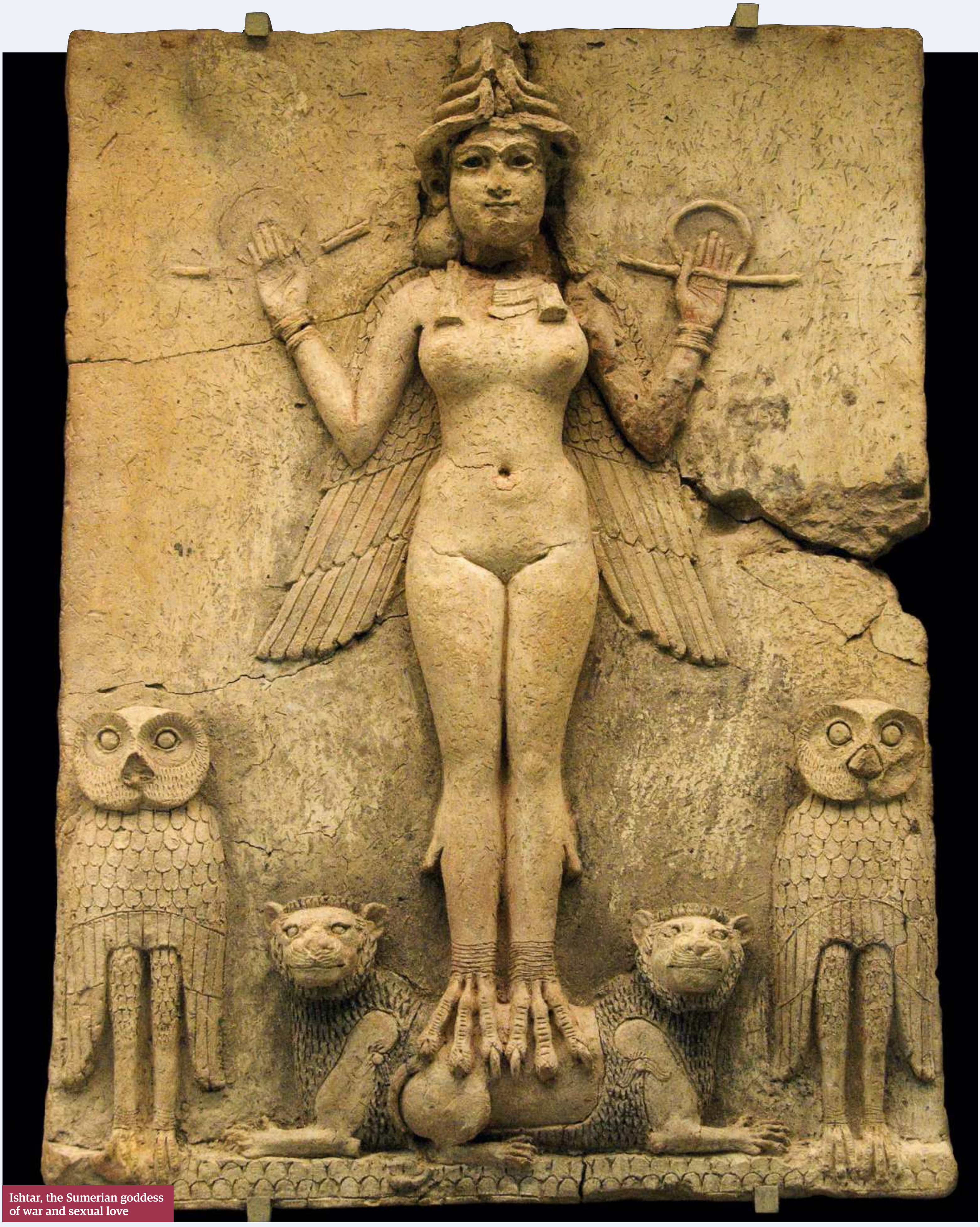
There was no shortage of charismatic preachers claiming to be the Messiah in 1st-century Palestine. Men such as Lukuas, Simon bar Kokhba and Simon bar Giora are figures in dusty history books today, crushed beneath the weight of Rome. But there was another Jewish preacher, as crushed by Rome, who is followed by some 2.4 billion people today. The overriding reason why that happened is what his followers believed happened after Yeshua was crucified. Crucifixion was designed by the Roman state as punishment and symbol of the futility of opposing it: as a means of execution it was deliberately agonising, humiliating and public, so that as many people as possible could see the consequences of opposing Rome. The preacher from Galilee was crucified outside the old walls of Jerusalem on a hill called Calvary and then hurriedly buried, as it was the eve of Passover. His disciples scattered, the Roman governor, Pilate, satisfied that he had staved off another riot, returned to his main job of ensuring that Palestine produced its allotted revenue to the state.

Then everything changed. The men who had seen Yeshua die, in agony, started saying that they had seen him again, alive. But not just alive as before: he was flesh and blood, he ate and drank with them, the marks of the Crucifixion still upon him, but he was a man transformed too, no longer bound by physical laws. The accounts in the Gospels, fragmentary and somewhat incoherent, convey something of the incredulity, wonder and dislocation of Yeshua's disciples. But that they believed it there can be no doubt. They believed it so much, they died for it. For at the heart of Christianity lies a man, broken on a cross, who lived again. Yeshua died, and lived again. Death died on the cross. That was the truth Yeshua's disciples took into their hearts; that was the message they spent their lives passing on. That is the hope that allowed an obscure sect of despised and persecuted people, most of them women and slaves, to endure an empire that had seen off many such challenges and then emerge, amid the wreckage of the Empire's dying, to fashion a new world based upon this hope. Death was no longer a place of shadow life but a foretaste of the glory of the final Resurrection, when all tears would be wiped away and a new heaven and a new earth arise. The challenges and failures of the centuries since have often obscured the message but never, quite, extinguished the hope.

A Brahmin meditates while behind him a body is cremated

© Luis Dafos/Alamy

> "There was no shortage of charismatic preachers claiming to be the Messiah"



Ishtar, the Sumerian goddess of war and sexual love

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Staring Death in The Face

In some cultures, physical death is not something to be secreted away - it's a cause for celebration

Written by Alice Barnes-Brown

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. That's a mantra commonly heard at Anglican funerals, where mourners don all-black garb and quietly display their grief at the graveside. Major religions across the world have standardised practices for sending the deceased into the next life and doing away with their mortal remains. Typically, death is feared, the body being taken care of almost immediately after a person passes.

Yet within the broad spectrum of religious belief are regional practices that will shock, stun and awe you in equal measure. Far from shying away from the end of life as we know it, some cultures actively embrace death. In these places, dancing, eating, drinking and partying with the dead are not disdainful or creepy, but signs of respect and affection. Death is perceived as a necessary and positive step in an individual's journey toward the afterlife - wherever that could be.

Spirit In The Sky

Death is a part of life, and burial traditions across the world have always reflected that. Funerary customs can reveal a lot about a culture itself. In Buddhism, it is believed that human souls will be reincarnated in another form, and that our bodies are of no use once the soul departs it. Tibet, which has a largely Buddhist population, has an extremely pragmatic way of disposing of soulless corpses - sky burials. And they aren't as idyllic as they sound.

When a person dies, the body is left untouched, and monks chant prayers by the corpse for up to five days. Villagers then transport the corpse to an exposed hillside, chanting more prayers along the way. Special sky burial grounds exist at the monasteries of Drigung and Ganden, and near the Larung Gar Buddhist Institute, where fake basalt columns and statues of deities sit aside centuries-old real ones, giving it the appearance of a stage.

The body is laid to rest on the ground, and a final ritual involving incense and barley flour is performed over the corpse by the monks, attracting a strange crowd of winged spectators - massive Himalayan vultures.

Specially trained body-breakers then cut the corpse into small pieces, and let the vultures eat it. Usually, the lower-grade bits of flesh are thrown to them first, to encourage them to eat the entire body - a good omen in Tibetan culture. When only the bones are left, they are ground up with yak butter and more barley flour, and the mix is fed to passing crows and hawks.

It is disrespectful to attend a sky burial unless invited to do so by the family, but the practice is intriguing. While the ritual sometimes horrifies and enthrals those learning about it, in the Tibetan context, this grisly process makes complete sense. It follows the example of Buddha, who sacrificed

While the ritual of sky burials seems sinister, in Tibetan culture it follows the example of Buddha

his own flesh to save a pigeon from being eaten by a vulture. Embracing the circle of life, a sky burial is seen as an individual's final act of compassion, sustaining the life force of another living creature by donating the empty vessel of their body.

Sky burial is utilitarian as well as philosophical. In Tibet, the soil is rocky, and frequently covered under layers of ice and snow. This makes burial in the ground very difficult. Cremation is also out of the question, because wood is so scarce. Allowing the vultures to get their fill circumvents both these issues.

Around 80% of Tibetans choose sky burials today, although it is not considered suitable for those under 18, pregnant women or those who die from infectious diseases (to protect the vultures). This practice takes a similar form in parts of Mongolia. In fact, civilisations across the world see the logic in using a process like it. Zoroastrians, plus some aboriginal Australians and Native American tribes, have also raised corpses to the sky.

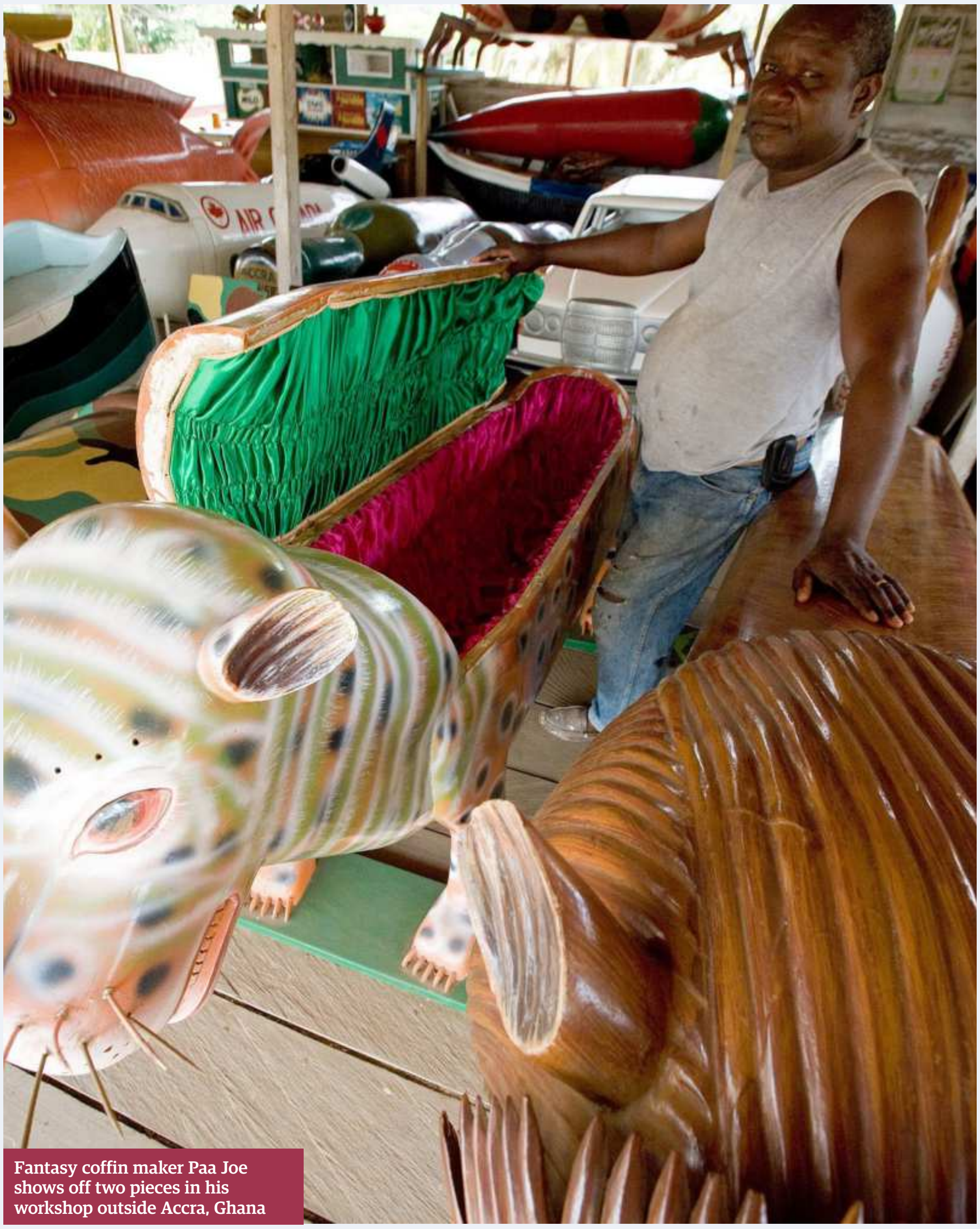
Since Time Immemorial

In the remote rainforest village of Sagada, the Philippines, the Igorot locals have a very different way of sending spirits into the sky - hanging coffins. Placed atop beams driven into cliffs, or in natural caves in the verdant Echo Valley, the hanging coffins are a tradition believed to date back 2,000 years. Ranging from plain wooden crates to bright blue boxes, the elderly villagers of Sagada carve their own coffins, or their family gives them a helping hand.

It's said that being interred in this way brings the deceased's soul closer to heaven, but the villagers have other motives, too. People do not want their bodies to rot, so their bodies are smoked before burial to slow the process. Placing them into a coffin above the ground prevents water from seeping in, and unlike in Tibet, prevents animals from gnawing at their flesh. Today, the hanging coffins are a tourist attraction, but with Christian practices strongly influencing the village youth, this ancient ritual is at risk of dying out.

The Philippines is full of unusual ways of dealing with death, which are the result of pre-colonial spirituality being adapted into Christian beliefs. Some Isneg people in the north of the country wrap their loved ones in leaves and bury them under the kitchen area of the house. In Cavite, a person might be entombed in a hollowed-out tree they select before their demise. The Benguet and Tinguian peoples dress the dead in fine clothes and seat them on a chair in the home, and the whole community comes to pay their respects.

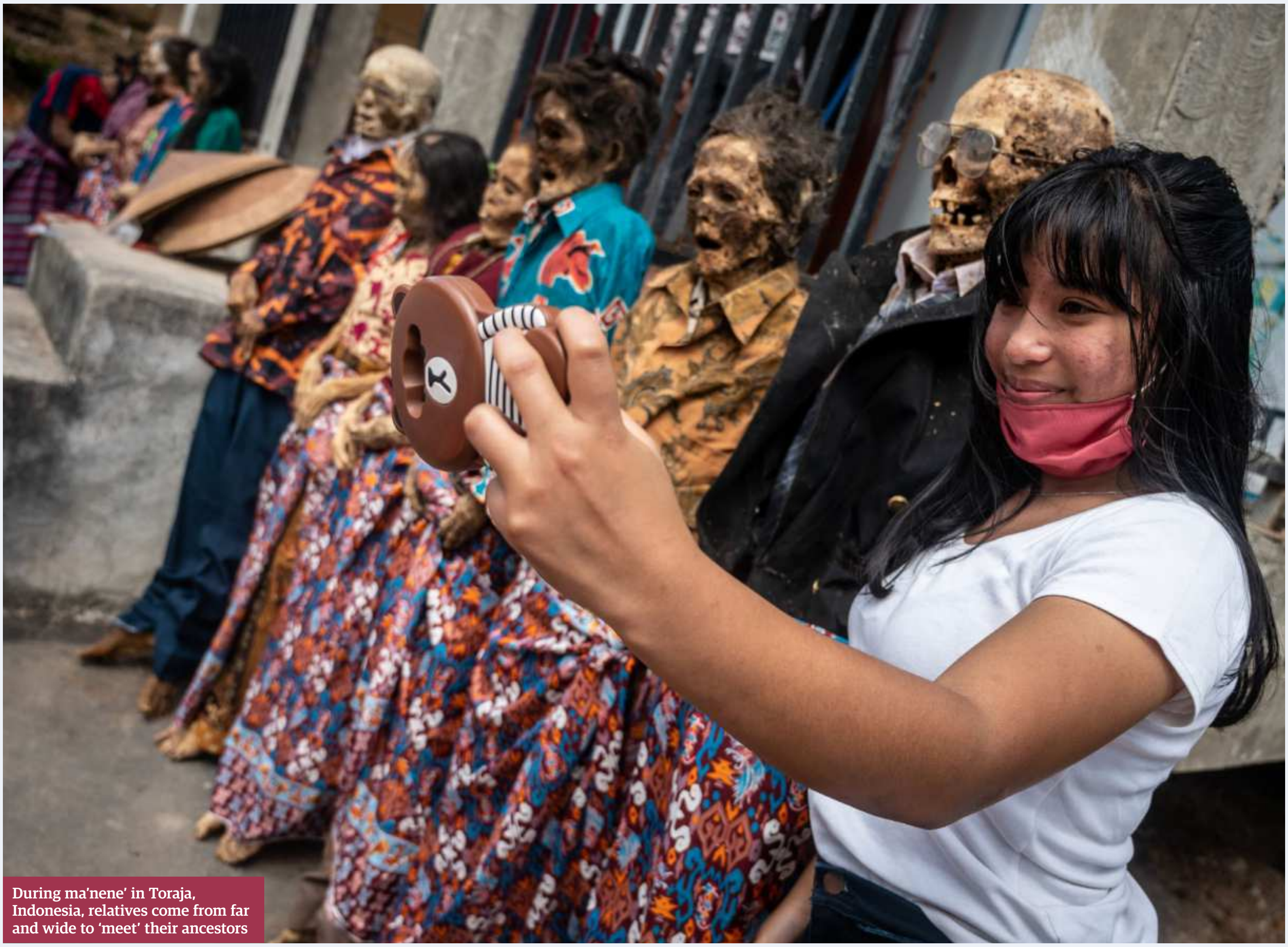
Treating the body as if it were still a living, breathing human can provide comfort and closure, and ease the grieving process. Nowhere is that more apparent than the Toraja culture, nestled in the jungle of Sulawesi, Indonesia. Here, physical death is merely a sickness, which must be soothed if the person's soul is to make a smooth transition into heaven. So, as a sign of respect, the body stays in the family home. The family continue to care for and chat to their relative, bringing them meals and dressing them as if they were still alive.


Fantasy coffin maker Paa Joe shows off two pieces in his workshop outside Accra, Ghana

"The family continue to care for and chat to their dead relative, bringing them meals and dressing them as if they were still alive"

The funeral itself could be weeks or months afterwards, because they are huge and expensive affairs. So, in the meantime, the body is mummified using an efficient mixture of formaldehyde and water. When it's time for the funeral, the Torajan community as well as relatives from the Indonesian diaspora descend upon the family home in a show of solidarity, light and noise. Funerals are not solemn affairs, but a time for people to catch up, celebrate and exchange gifts. The body is transported in a large wooden model resembling their ancestral home, before finally being laid to rest with a Christian ceremony and plenty of buffalo sacrifices. However, the process is still far from over.

After the funeral, a person's soul is believed to have gone into the afterlife, but caring for their remains is still an important duty. So, every few years in August, the body of a loved one is exhumed in a ceremony known as 'ma'nene". Their graves are spruced up, the dead are given gifts, snacks and a change of clothes. More



During ma'nene' in Toraja, Indonesia, relatives come from far and wide to 'meet' their ancestors

Αληθως Ανεστη!
Truly He is Risen!

Greek Easter eggs are used to play a game called tsougrisma, where two people crash their eggs together to see which cracks

Dining With The Dead

For a small community of Greeks, picnicking with a deceased relative is an Easter tradition

In the northern Greek village of Rizana, a family wrapped up warm for the great outdoors tucks into cheesy breads, colourful salads and cakes, washing it all down with copious amounts of fizzy drinks and hot Russian vodka. The scene is familiar enough, but the setting is rather unusual – their blankets are laid atop the grave of a deceased relative.

For Pontic Greeks (ethnic Greeks who once resided along the Black Sea, before being dispersed across the USSR, eventually finding their way back to Greece in modern times), the graveyard picnic is an important community tradition. They believe it is important to celebrate the lives of the deceased, but even more important to keep Pontic Greek traditions alive, especially as the younger generations integrate more into Greek society.

So, on the Sunday of St. Thomas, the first Sunday after Easter, Pontic Greek families pack up their lunches and take them to the cemetery. Far from it being a macabre occasion, it's a day of celebration, with children playing amongst the graves. People pour drinks, break bread and crack traditional red Easter eggs with each other while sharing a special family moment.

Before they leave, the family leaves a red egg, some vodka and a few snacks on the grave, so the deceased can feel like part of the fun too.

importantly, families have time to speak to (and even take photos with) their dead relatives again, before saying goodbye for another few years. In this way, a person never really dies, as they live on in the memory of their descendants.

Party Of A Lifetime

Funerals are often meant to be a celebration of someone's life, but Malagasy funerary customs really take that up a notch. Famadihana – a ritual undertaken in parts of Madagascar's highlands – means 'turning of the bones', and that's no misnomer. The graves of relatives and friends are opened every few years, cleaned, and the body is wrapped in fresh cloths.

While all this is going on, a live band strikes up some music, and the relatives throw a proper party. People dance for hours, and will pick up the corpse and dance with it around the family tomb. When their feet tire, a moment of quiet reflection descends, as the family wrap the body in fine silk scarves and spray it with aromatic perfumes. Relatives tenderly write the name of the deceased on the silk, sharing memories and stories with each other. A final dance rouses everyone – well, almost everyone – back to life, and the family leave gifts of photographs, money and alcohol with the body, before sealing the crypt for another seven years.

The Malagasy believe that a soul doesn't reach the afterlife until the body has fully decomposed, so the Famadihana is said to help speed souls along. It also means that younger generations can 'meet' their ancestors, as well as relatives they haven't seen since the last Famadihana. The event is so important, if a person dies between festivals, they are placed in a coffin until they can formally enter the family crypt at the next festival.

Like many funerary customs, however, Famadihana declines as the years go on. Buying silk shrouds every few years is expensive, and some of the local churches are keen to stamp out the practice – particularly as it has been linked to the spread of disease in Madagascar.

Voodoo Rites Of Passage

Voodoo, a mixture of West African tribal beliefs and imported Christianity, is much maligned and misunderstood. However, it is certainly widespread, and different forms of it exist in West Africa, the Caribbean and North America. A common thread among all Voodoo varieties is the focus on spirits: that everything on Earth has a spirit, and everything that happens on Earth is guided by an invisible spirit.

In Haiti, a Caribbean nation known for its complex and elaborate 'Vodou' practices, death is all about the spirit. Once a person dies, Haitians mourn for seven to nine days. Catholic prayers are performed alongside Vodou chants, and relatives gather to eat and drink. On the ninth day, it's believed the soul is freed from the body, and the person can be buried (typically in an above-ground tomb).

In some cases, it becomes necessary to lure a person's spirit from their body, so it can pass peacefully. This can be done by chanting, playing musical instruments, and trapping it in another object, such as a pumpkin. Once the spirit has departed or been taken from the body, it is 'released' somewhere else, and a ceremony akin to an open-casket funeral takes place for the carcass.

The soul, meanwhile, stays underwater for precisely one year and one day. Another ceremony drags the 'soul' from the water, and its relatives finally send it on to join the spirit world for good. Burying a body without these last rites is seen as desecration, but large-scale disasters such as the 2010 earthquake prevented many bodies from being buried with proper Vodou rituals, which caused great distress to the community.

Final Fantasy

In Ghana, one particular funerary innovation has captivated the imagination: brightly coloured and fun 'fantasy coffins'. The Ga tribe, who live close to the Ghanaian capital Accra, traditionally hold intricate and fanfare-filled funerals for the deceased, as they believe their life on earth will largely continue in the afterlife. Therefore, it is important that the burial vessel reflects the deceased's personality or their occupation.

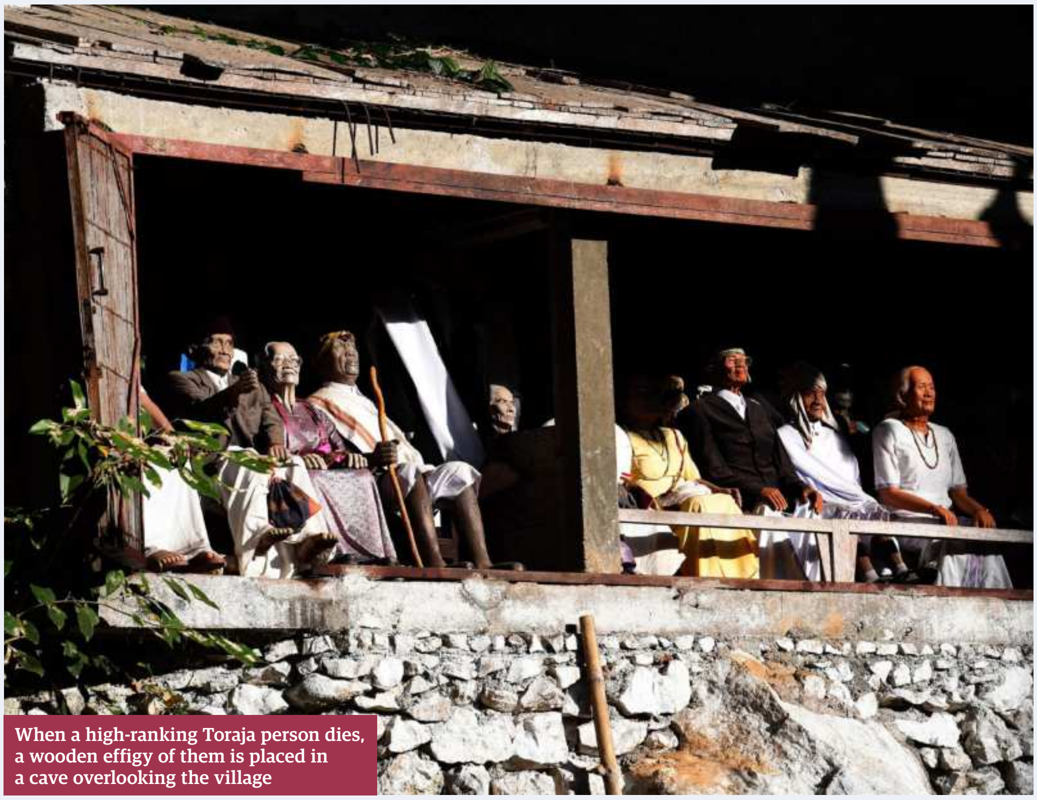
In the mid-20th century, the craze for 'fantasy coffins' took off. People began requesting caskets in the shape of boats, chickens, fish and even cars, to reflect what they liked doing (or spent a lot of time doing) in life. The idea was so novel and refreshing that people outside the Ga community ordered coffins from skilled Ga craftsmen like Paa Joe (pictured on page 114).

Visiting dignitaries, such as ex-President Jimmy Carter and even Ghana's own Kofi Annan, the former UN secretary general, have been known to stop by Joe's workshop. Carter allegedly purchased two coffins – but what he requested is kept strictly under wraps. Fantasy coffins have also been exhibited in European and US museums, presumably causing viewers to wonder what their own 'fantasy coffin' would resemble.

In Taiwan, a fantasy of a different kind dominates funerals. At some wakes, 'Electric Flower Cars' (pick-up trucks converted into mobile stages) proceed slowly through the streets, their neon lights illuminating the glitter and suggestive movements of a stripper. Quite literally dancing for the dead, young women are paid to dance and sing at the top of their lungs for the deceased, putting on a show that commands everyone's attention.

In some sections of Taiwanese culture, the bigger the funeral, the better – a large crowd of

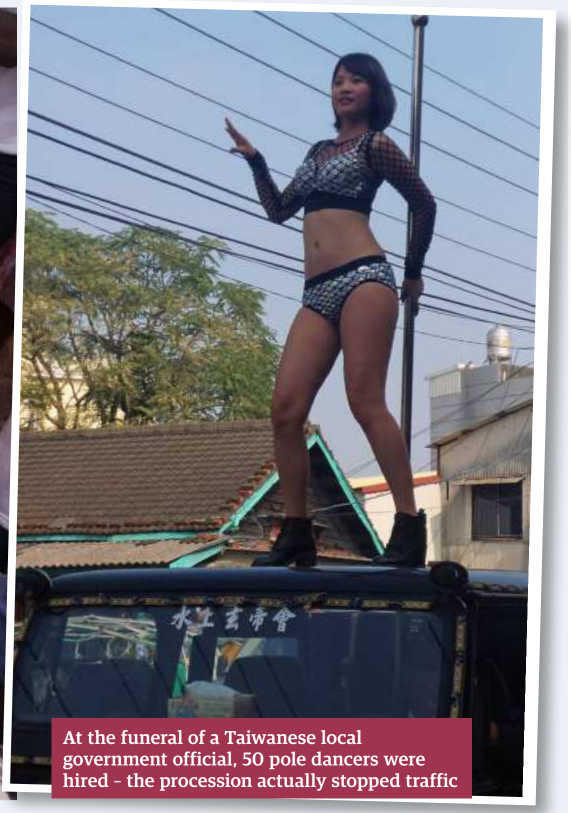
> "Spending upwards of $20,000 on a funeral and hiring strippers to boost attendance numbers is far from unusual in Taiwan"



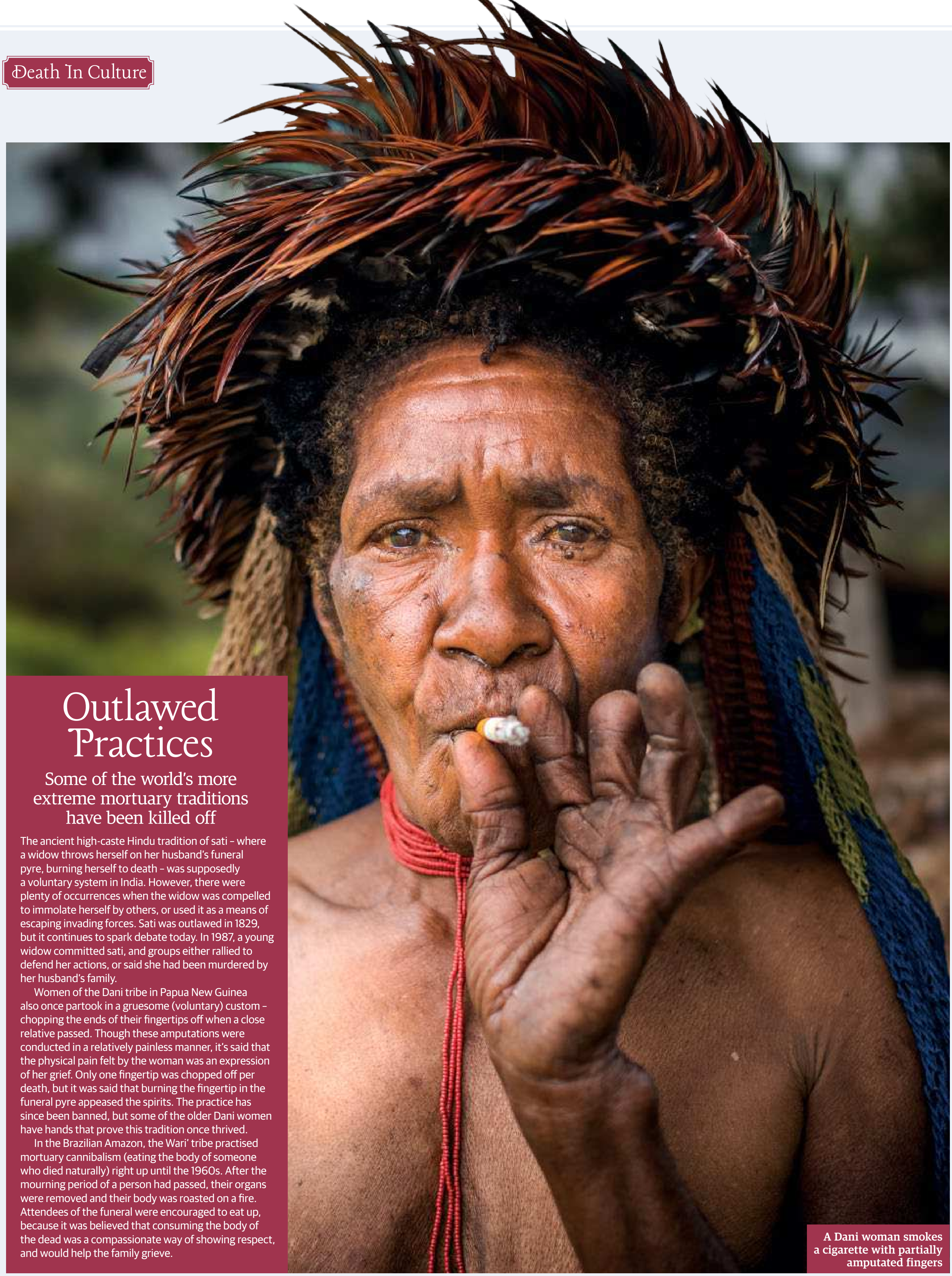
When a high-ranking Toraja person dies, a wooden effigy of them is placed in a cave overlooking the village

At Vodou funerals in Haiti, the 'rah-rah' is a procession where people dance in the streets

During Famadihana, the body is wrapped in a new burial shroud



At the funeral of a Taiwanese local government official, 50 pole dancers were hired - the procession actually stopped traffic



Outlawed Practices

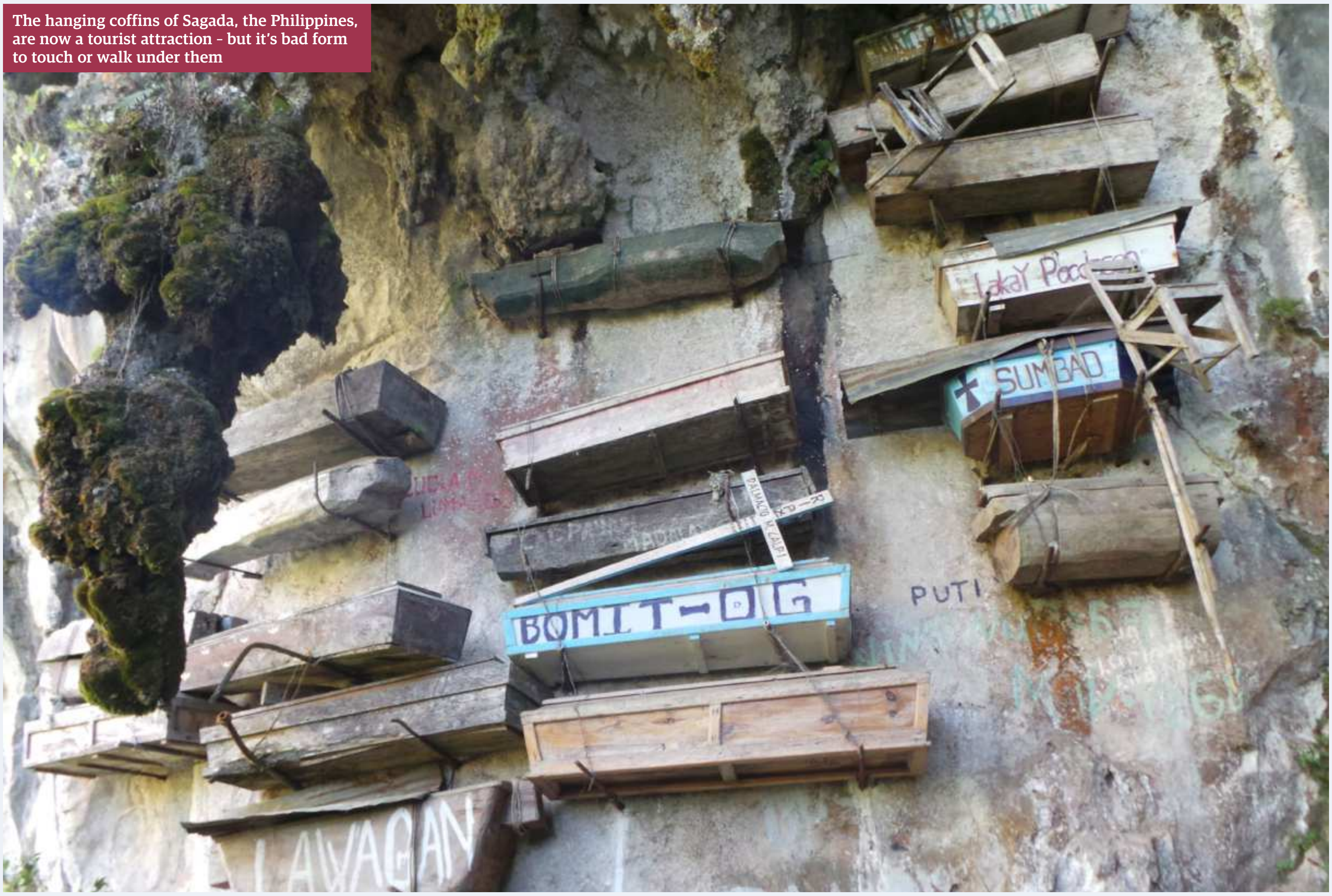
Some of the world's more extreme mortuary traditions have been killed off

The ancient high-caste Hindu tradition of sati – where a widow throws herself on her husband's funeral pyre, burning herself to death – was supposedly a voluntary system in India. However, there were plenty of occurrences when the widow was compelled to immolate herself by others, or used it as a means of escaping invading forces. Sati was outlawed in 1829, but it continues to spark debate today. In 1987, a young widow committed sati, and groups either rallied to defend her actions, or said she had been murdered by her husband's family.

Women of the Dani tribe in Papua New Guinea also once partook in a gruesome (voluntary) custom – chopping the ends of their fingertips off when a close relative passed. Though these amputations were conducted in a relatively painless manner, it's said that the physical pain felt by the woman was an expression of her grief. Only one fingertip was chopped off per death, but it was said that burning the fingertip in the funeral pyre appeased the spirits. The practice has since been banned, but some of the older Dani women have hands that prove this tradition once thrived.

In the Brazilian Amazon, the Wari' tribe practised mortuary cannibalism (eating the body of someone who died naturally) right up until the 1960s. After the mourning period of a person had passed, their organs were removed and their body was roasted on a fire. Attendees of the funeral were encouraged to eat up, because it was believed that consuming the body of the dead was a compassionate way of showing respect, and would help the family grieve.

A Dani woman smokes a cigarette with partially amputated fingers



The hanging coffins of Sagada, the Philippines, are now a tourist attraction – but it's bad form to touch or walk under them

'mourners' is seen as a sign that the deceased lived a full and beloved life. Because of this, spending upwards of $20,000 on a funeral and hiring stripteases to boost attendance numbers is far from unusual.

The custom – which some say dates back to the 19th century – is an unusual fusion of Buddhist and folkloric beliefs, mashed up with the involvement of the local mafia (who first started hiring strippers) and Taiwanese independence supporters (who see it as resisting Chinese cultural dominance). These days, it's confined to working-class areas of southern Taiwan, but lively performances are sometimes posted on the internet for the world to see.

Future Funerals

As the world becomes a more globalised place, colonialism has imposed 'mainstream' religion on parts of the world. Conventions surrounding death are starting to look more and more homogenous. However, globalisation can be a two-way street, with cross-cultural influences permeating every aspect of life. The 21st century has seen an interesting shift – and perhaps a new-found appreciation – towards non-traditional funeral practices in the West.

Funerals are certainly becoming more lively affairs, focusing on celebrating a person's life rather than mourning their death. And in some families, funeral services are moving away from closed-casket religious affairs, towards humanist – and even Buddhist and Hindu – rituals. Crestone, Colorado has the USA's only open-air cremation ground, allowing grieving families to adorn the body with juniper branches and light the funeral pyre themselves.

This kind of funeral suggests a greater willingness to confront death than previously, but like many practices, is also borne out of practicality. Graveyards are running out of space, and a growing number of human beings on the planet mean our impact has increased exponentially. The eco-conscious may now opt for a 'green burial', which typically involves burying the deceased without a coffin (or with a biodegradable one), embalming agents and headstones or mausoleums. Allowing nature to take its course has happened for thousands of years, yet is only recently experiencing a renaissance.

On the other end of the spectrum, another trend for disposing of bodies is blasting them into space. The person is usually cremated before their ashes are put on a rocket for their final destination. While the process is costly indeed, it's becoming increasingly popular for space lovers – including *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry, who died in 1991 and had some of his ashes scattered in Earth's atmosphere.

As mortal humans, the end of our lives is something we cannot avoid. People all over the world have different ways of dealing with it, and each method provides comfort and closure in its own way. But we humans have a lot to learn from one another, and one thing is for sure: funerals are nothing to be frightened of.

A Tibetan sky burial site in Gansu province, Hezuo, China

Ghost Festivals

All over the world, ghost festivals are a common and often ancient practice. They are held to venerate, celebrate and remember the dead

Written by Catherine Curzon & Ben Gazur

In cultures across the globe, festivals that honour the dead are common. Though each has its unique elements, there are also plenty of similarities, chief among them a wish to appease and honour the spirits of the departed, ensuring that they look on the living with benevolence and kindness.

Some of these celebrations, such as the hugely popular and commercial Halloween, last for just one or two days. Others, including the Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival, can be as long as a month. Perhaps surprisingly, the majority of ghost festivals aren't mournful affairs but celebrations, typified by the Day of the Dead feasts, and the social atmosphere of Thursday of the Dead, not to mention the gifts that are handed out to trick-or-treaters.

While gifts are sometimes exchanged by the living, the dead don't miss out. Different cultures share the tradition of leaving offerings of food, small items or even money to appease the spirits. It's also traditional to tend gravesites as a mark of respect, or decorate them with bright altars and flowers. In Japan, for example, each July people travel to their ancestral villages to celebrate Bon, and honour the memory of their ancestors with a trip to their grave and a ritual fire to see them safely to the afterlife.

Another common element of ghost festivals is a need to guide the wandering dead to their rest. This is why the Chinese send lanterns down rivers and in Nepal, live cows or children in cow costumes process through the streets for Gai Jatra, in the belief that spirits will catch the cow's tail and follow it into the next world.

In the west, meanwhile, trick-or-treaters dress in masks and costumes in order to fool wandering spirits who may be looking out for souls to drag into the next world. Paper lanterns, candles and Jack O'Lanterns are lit at ghost festivals in all corners of the globe, both to ward off evil spirits and to light the way to rest for wandering souls.

Regardless of where in the world the ghost festival is taking place, some things are always the same. The celebrations are as respectful as they are fun and hark back to ancient traditions. Whether in China, Nepal, Russia or the United States, ghost festivals are intended not just to honour the dead, but to unite the living in celebration and commemoration.

"The celebrations are as respectful as they are fun and hark back to ancient traditions"

Thursday of the Dead

On Thursday of the Dead, Arab Christians and Muslims alike share a feast to honour the souls of the departed

Thursday of the Dead goes by many names. Variously known as Khamis al-Amwat, Thursday of the Secrets or even Thursday of the Eggs, it is a feast day shared by Christians and Muslims in the Levant. Although the date of the feast changes annually, it always falls on the Thursday between the respective Easter Sundays of the Eastern Orthodox Christian and Catholic churches.

On Thursday of the Dead, the souls of the departed are honoured by their living descendants, and this is a feast day that has become uniquely associated with women. Just before sunrise, women gather at the tombs of their ancestors to pray and share ka'ak al-asfar. This seeded or decorated bread cake is popular in the region, and is known as the yellow roll. Once their prayers are finished, the celebrants distribute gifts of dried fruit and ka'ak al-asfar to their families and the poor alike. Children are given ka'ak al-asfar, as well as sweet treats and decorative eggs that have been painted yellow. Observers of Thursday of the Dead have noted that the day serves as much as a celebration and social event for the women concerned as a chance to commemorate the dead.

The tradition has been shared between Muslims and Christians since the 12th century, when Saladin encouraged the adoption of Christian customs in traditionally Muslim regions, hoping that it would lead to increased religious tolerance and understanding. The fact that mixed faiths share the feast day is intended to reflect the belief that those who have passed into the next world share a single, integrated society. Other death traditions are also connected to Thursday of the Dead, as Muslims in mourning visit the tomb of a newly dead loved one to share traditional foods every Thursday following the death until the following Easter. After this, they are marked by the annual Thursday of the Dead celebrations.

In the 21st century, this practice of weekly visits has become less frequent, though ka'ak al-asfar is still distributed according to the tradition on the Thursday and Monday following a death, as well as during Easter. Though it is known by a number of names across the region, in the Syrian city of Homs, Thursday of the Dead is widely known as Thursday of Sweetness, referring not only to the sweets distributed by women to children, but also buying or making them beforehand.

Thursday of the Dead originated in the time of Saladin, when he encouraged Muslims and Christians to share customs and traditions

Image source: Getty Images

Radonitsa: The Day of Rejoicing

On Radonitsa, or the Day of Rejoicing, Orthodox Russians commemorate those who have passed away with food, gifts and ceremony

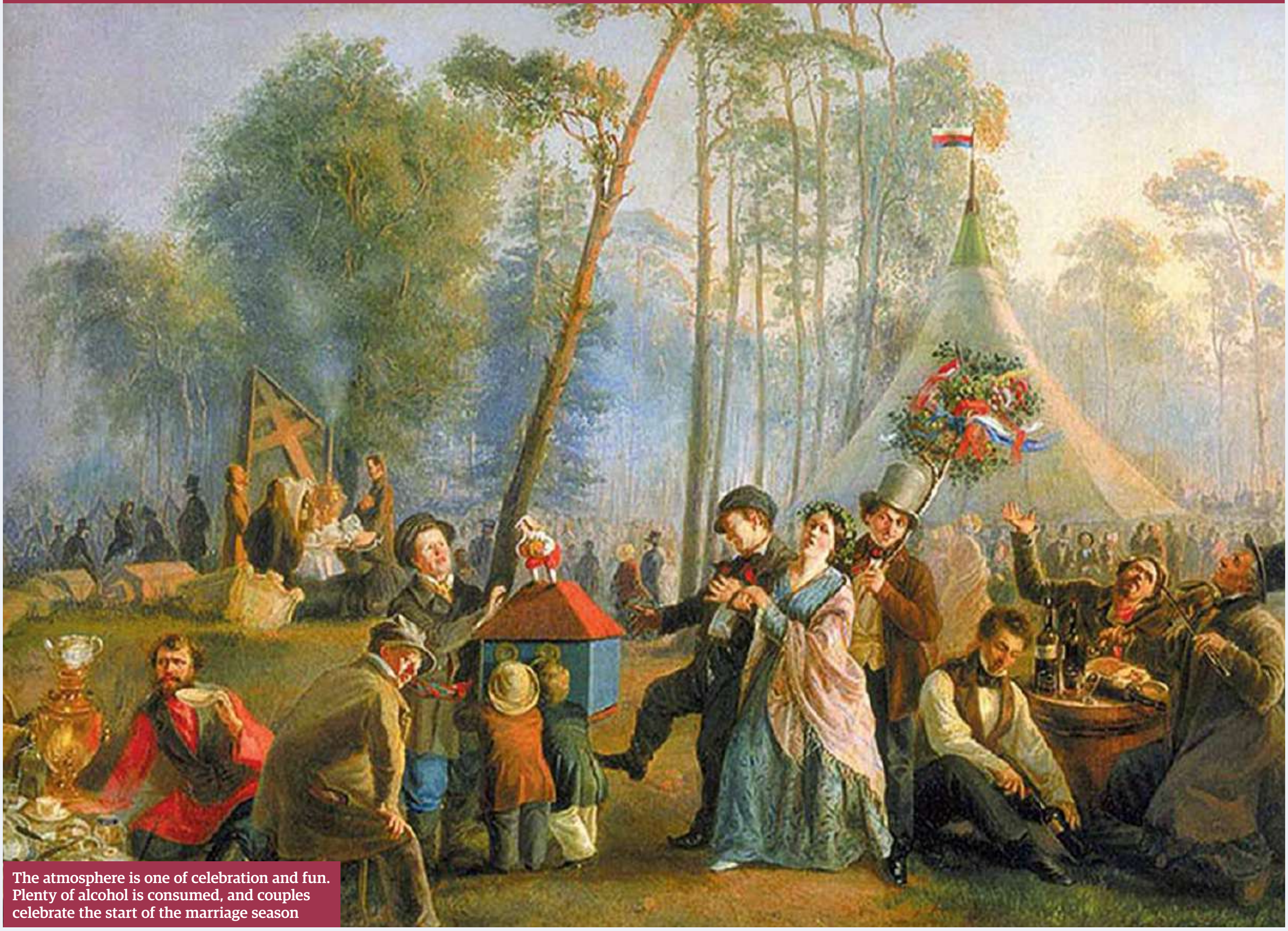
Radonitsa is a Russian Orthodox commemoration of the dead that falls, depending on the particular country in which it's being celebrated, on the second Monday or Tuesday of Pascha, or Easter. The feast was moved to the Tuesday in some areas so priests, who were observing Easter fasts on the Monday, could still participate. In the pre-Christian era, families visited the resting places of their departed ancestors and held celebratory feasts at the gravesides. Once people converted to Christianity, this tradition continued within the Russian Orthodox Church as Radonitsa, the Day of Rejoicing, in which celebrations are held not only for the dead, but to mark the resurrection of Jesus.

As the young dance and celebrate the coming of spring in Russian Orthodox graveyards and cemeteries, the festival begins. Mothers and wives who have lost children and husbands join children who have lost their parents to perform ritual lamentations. Once these are concluded, food from Paschal feasts are brought to the gravesides, and families gather together to enjoy the banquet. Koliva, a dish of boiled wheat, is traditionally served to honour the dead in the belief that the wheat represents those who have died but may yet be resurrected, just as a grain of wheat grows from the soil. A mixture of mead and honey is poured over the grave as an offering to those who rest there, and the atmosphere is one of great revelry, with alcohol consumed in generous amounts.

The focus of Radonitsa isn't on mourning, but on resurrection and hope. Once the feast is concluded, the remains are left at the graves for the poor, while celebrants return home to leave more food on the table overnight in case some spirits are still hungry. Also common during Radonitsa is the tradition of married people giving gifts to their in-laws in the belief that this will spread joy through every household for the year ahead.

Radonitsa also marks the start of the marriage season. With weddings forbidden during Pascha, it is the first opportunity since Lent for marriages to take place, which further adds to the spirit of fun and hope. A common sight during Radonitsa are Easter eggs, which are placed on tombs and graves as symbols of resurrection, and hymns are sung too as people process through graveyards before alms are handed to the poor. In this feasting and festivity, the joy of the first resurrection is recreated and celebrated once more.

> "A mixture of mead and honey is poured over the grave as an offering"



The atmosphere is one of celebration and fun. Plenty of alcohol is consumed, and couples celebrate the start of the marriage season

During the Hungry Ghost Festival, illuminated lanterns are floated down rivers to lure unwelcome or malevolent ghosts away from the living

The Hungry Ghost Festival

At the Buddhist Hungry Ghost Festival, spirits receive offerings intended to send them back to the afterlife without harming the living

The Hungry Ghost Festival is a traditional East Asian celebration that is held by Buddhists and Taoists on the 14th or 15th of the seventh month, according to the Chinese calendar. This is traditionally known as the Ghost Month, while the day on which the festival is celebrated is known as Ghost Day, and festivities fill the month. On Ghost Day, it's believed that the entrances to the realms of heaven and hell are thrown open, sending spirits into the world of the living. As damned souls swarm out in search of mayhem on Earth, celebrants perform rituals that are intended to appease them and send them back to where they came from. Central to the festival is the veneration of the dead, when the living seek to appease the spirits of those who might otherwise cause them harm.

They prepare impressive feasts and burn fake money and other offerings, which they believe will then become available in the afterlife, making the souls' eternities a little easier. Lanterns and candles are lit in the streets, which are intended to guide the spirits back to their own realm.

Feasting is an important part of the festival, and food is also left outside so passing ghosts can eat at leisure should they wish. It's frowned upon to clear away offerings from the streets during the festival, while people refrain from activities such as swimming in case a spirit drowns them. Marriages held during Ghost Month are believed to be destined to fail.

At dusk on Ghost Day, photographs of the dead are put out on traditional family tablets alongside plates of specially prepared foods. Their descendants then light incense and bow before the offerings, seeking blessing from their ancestors. The day closes with a feast, at which one seat is left empty so the dead can join their family and dine with them.

On the last day of the month, the gates of hell are closed and barred again, trapping the restless and unredeemed souls inside for another year. Celebrations are held in which more offerings are burned for those in hell, so they will have money and goods in the afterlife. Monks perform chants to banish any stubborn ghosts while families gather beside at rivers to paint their ancestors' names onto lanterns that they then float away on the current.

This beautiful ritual, they believe, will draw the ghosts whose names are written on the lanterns to follow the tiny lights downriver and away from their living families, ensuring peace for another year.

Samhain

Halloween may have largely replaced it, but Samhain is still one of the most important festivals in the Pagan year

Samhain, falling on 31 October, is the last of the three harvest festivals celebrated by modern-day Pagans. It also marks the true beginning of winter and was seen as a day of the dead. Several Neolithic tombs were constructed in such a way that the light of sunrise on Samhain would illuminate the interior. The Christian Allhallowtide held on the same day may preserve this association with the older feast, as its ringing of church bells is thought to provide comfort to the departed.

The early descriptions of Samhain show it as a time to end farming and warfare and to gather families and tribes together to survive the winter. In the cold nights there was much drinking and tale-telling to pass the time. It was a time of potential danger, as the fairies would open their mounds and it was possible for the dead to return from the spirit realm. Samhain was the time when cattle and other livestock were slaughtered and preserved for winter and it may have been a time that was associated with sacrifices. On Samhain the fire in the hearth was allowed to burn out while people worked in the fields. That night bonfires were lit to ward off evil and fire was taken from these to relight the home fires. Smoke from these fires was thought to be protective.

Today bonfires are still lit at Samhain. Major cities such as Edinburgh see large processions of people carrying flaming torches alongside drums and music. Traditionally the festivities of Samhain could be accompanied by dressing up and disguise. Boys would sometimes go from house to house to beg wood to be added to the communal fire. To light the way revellers carved lanterns from turnips and wurzels. It is easy to see how Samhain influenced the later traditions of Halloween, which many people celebrate today. For modern Pagans, Samhain is both a time to remember the dead and to celebrate. Feasts are often held as a way of offering hospitality to the deceased.

You may want to bake a batch of soul cakes to offer to the poor. It is also a time to introduce newborns to the community. Samhain can be the proper moment to reflect on things that have ended in the past year, as well as the hopes for what may come.

Samhain brings Pagans together to celebrate life and death as they remember those who have passed on

Image source: Getty

The Three Days of Allhallowtide

Though Halloween is one of the most famous and widely celebrated holidays, it's actually part of a three-day celebration known as Allhallowtide

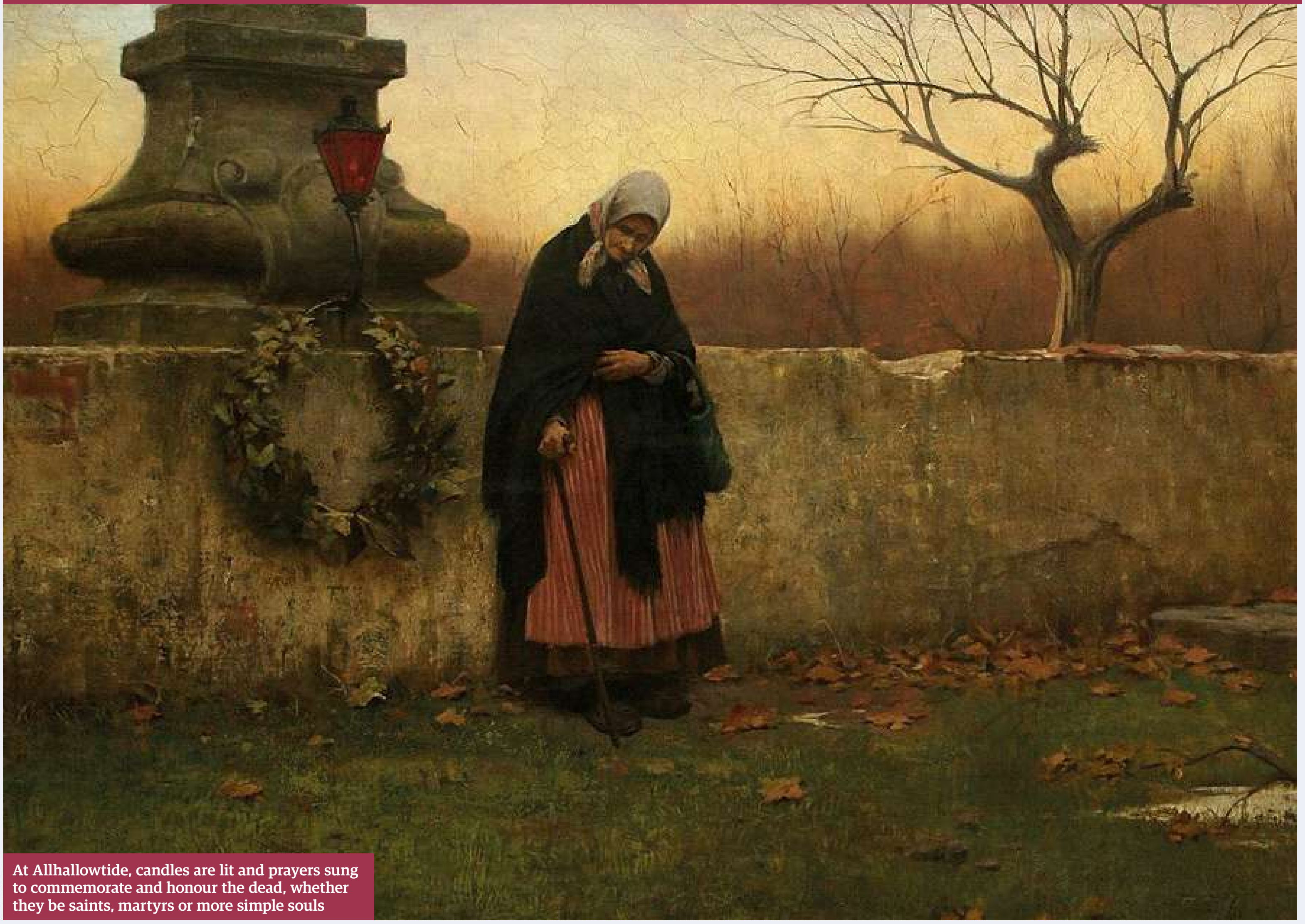
There can be few people in the west who haven't heard of Halloween. It's one of the world's most famed festivals, and is widely celebrated across continents. What they may not all realise, however, is that it's part of a three-day celebration in the Western Christian tradition. The triduum of Allhallowtide marks All Saints' Eve (better known as Halloween), All Saints' Day (All Hallows' Day) and All Souls' Day. It begins, of course, on 31 October, and continues until 2 November. Like the Day of the Dead, it is a three-day period in which the deceased are remembered, including saints, martyrs, and can be traced back for centuries.

The first whispers of what became Hallowtide can be found as far back as the 8th century, and festivals to commemorate the dead are long-standing traditions all over the globe. The word 'Allhallowtide' was first used in the 15th century, but eight centuries before that, the church discovered that there were so many martyrs to venerate that the calendar couldn't accommodate them all, so they came up with the concept of All Saints' Day, on which all saints and martyrs would be commemorated. A vigil was held on the previous day, which soon became known as All Hallows' Eve. The inception of All Souls' Day began in the 9th century, and was an opportunity for prayers for all the dead, not just the venerated. Though these events were initially celebrated over eight days, they were eventually condensed into the three we know today.

Some believe that All Hallows' Eve was celebrated in Pagan harvest culture as Samhain, when the veil between the world and the afterlife grew thin and people took to donning masks and costumes to protect themselves from wandering souls. Today those costumes have become familiar as part of trick or treating and on Allhallowtide, so-called soulers – usually children or the poor – went from door to door praying and singing traditional songs in return for soul cakes, which were intended to offer comfort to souls in purgatory.

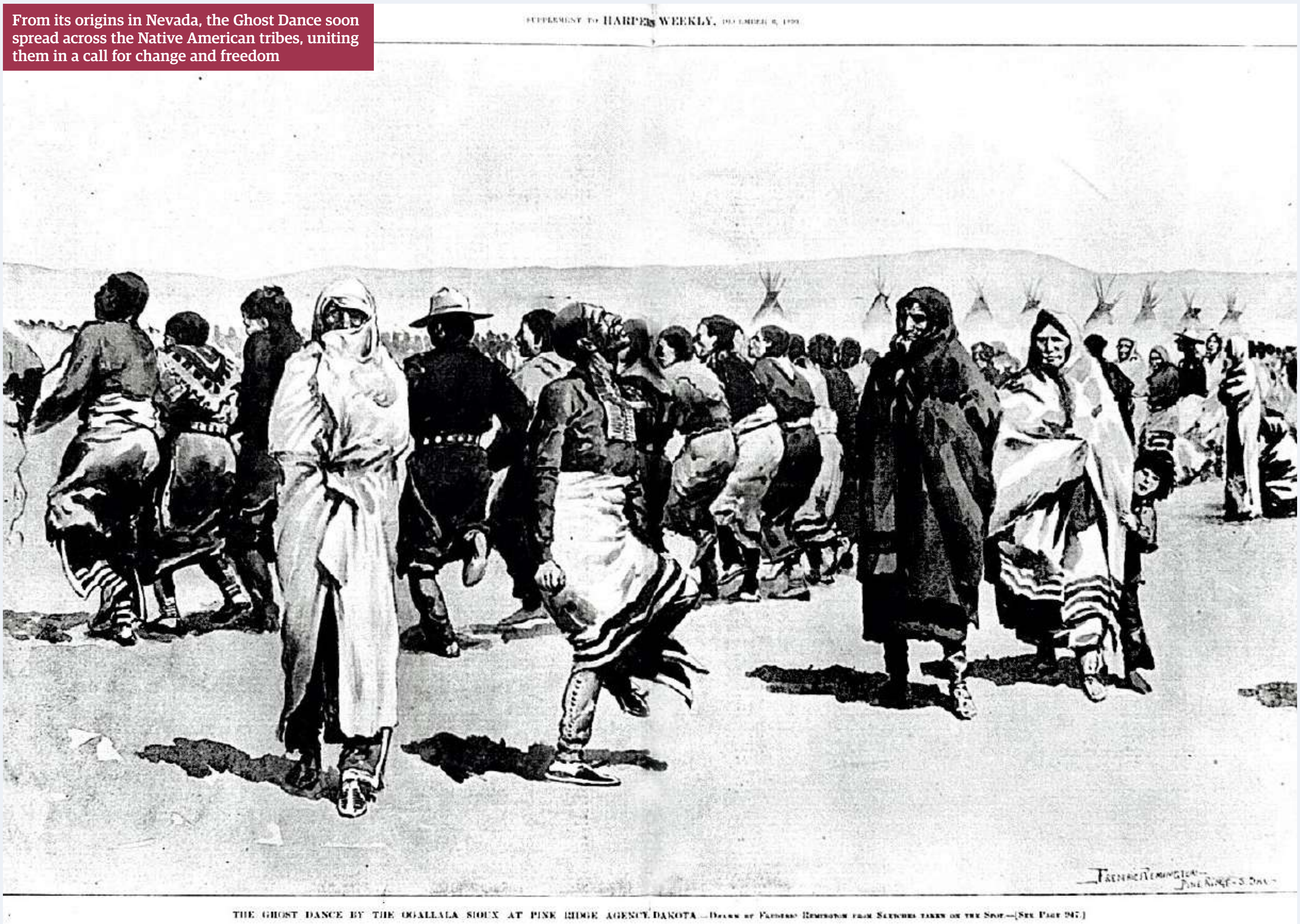
Though All Saints' Day is a day of celebration when candles are lit and prayers are offered up, All Souls' Day is usually marked by more sombre celebrations. Bells are rung for the dead and candles are lit to guide lost souls to heaven and, the living hope, peaceful rest.

> "The church discovered that there were so many martyrs to venerate that the calendar couldn't accommodate them all"



At Allhallowtide, candles are lit and prayers sung to commemorate and honour the dead, whether they be saints, martyrs or more simple souls

From its origins in Nevada, the Ghost Dance soon spread across the Native American tribes, uniting them in a call for change and freedom


SUPPLEMENT TO HARPER'S WEEKLY, DECEMBER 6, 1890.
THE GHOST DANCE BY THE OGALLALA SIOUX AT PINE RIDGE AGENCY, DAKOTA.—Drawn by Frederic Remington from Sketches taken on the Spot.—[See Page 967.]

The Ghost Dance

When Native Americans performed the Ghost Dance, they believed that the ritual would summon the spirits of the dead for the good of all their people

The Ghost Dance, or Natdia, entered Native American spiritual practices in 1890, when Native Americans were desperately in need of hope. They found it in Wovoka, the spiritual leader of the Northern Paiute people of Nevada. The Ghost Dance originated in Wovoka's dream of a new and bountiful Earth in which the Northern Palute lived in peace, ascending into the sky with their ancestors as the world was born. They reached this new world by performing a traditional circle dance during which they entered a state of religious ecstasy and were able to summon the spirits of their ancient ancestors. The dance banished white settlers and brought harmony to the Native Americans.

Wovoka believed that he was the messiah and that he had a duty to ready his people for their salvation. Central to this was the retreat of white settlers and the peaceful collaboration of different tribes to create a moral and prosperous society. Soon the Ghost Dance spread outside of Nevada, becoming part of Native American ritual across the country. Each tribe added its own subtle elements, but common to all was the belief that the dance would call the spirits of the dead to their aid and create a new Earth for them to enjoy, which would be reborn before their eyes.

Wovoka was the acknowledged expert in the movement and people travelled across the country to Nevada to hear his teachings. Under his guidance they learned that they should share a feast and dance in circles for four days and nights. On the fifth day, the dancers bathed before returning to their homes until, six weeks later, they repeated the ritual.

When word of the popularity of the Ghost Dance reached the Bureau of Indian Affairs, agents believed that its central promise that white settlers would be banished from Native American lands could be interpreted as a call to arms. The fact that the dancers believed that the ritual provided their shirts with bulletproof properties seemed like further proof of this. When the Lakota people joined the movement, the BIA detained their chief, Sitting Bull, and ordered him to stop the dance. In the ensuing confrontation Sitting Bull was killed. His death led to the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, when US soldiers fired upon the Lakota people, killing and injuring hundreds.

The massacre marked the end of the movement's popularity. Wovoka continued as a shaman, but the new world of peace and prosperity that he longed for was not to be.

> "Wovoka believed that he was the messiah and that he had a duty to ready his people for their salvation"

People of Mexican heritage come together to celebrate the Day of the Dead every year, creating decorative altars to honour their ancestors

Image source: Eneas de Troya (Wikipedia)

Day of The Dead

Mexico's iconic Day of the Dead, or Dia de Muertos, is renowned for its colourful and lively celebration of lost loved ones

The Day of the Dead is an annual, multi-day public holiday that is celebrated across Mexico and by people of Mexican heritage all across the world. Though it is intended to honour the dead, it's a far from mournful occasion, and is instead known for its colour and celebration. Family and friends gather to remember their deceased loved ones with lively parties, believing that the spirits of the dead return to celebrate with them during the days and nights of the festival.

The Day of the Dead has been celebrated in Mexico for centuries, and reflects the Mexican belief that death is simply one more part of the natural cycle that all humans must go through. Before the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the 16th century, the holiday was celebrated in early summer, but as the years passed, it shifted in the calendar to coincide with the Christian celebration of Allhallowtide, and is now marked for three days from 31st October to 2nd November. Although northern Mexico traditionally didn't celebrate the festival due to observing its own indigenous traditions, by the 20th century the Day of the Dead was a nationwide event.

On the three days in question, family and friends come together at the graves of their loved ones in the spirit of rejoicing. Here they construct brightly painted altars called ofrendas, which are decorated with sugar skulls – or calaveras – and specially written poems. They layer the altars with flowers including Mexican marigolds – traditionally the flowers of the dead – not to mention the deceased's favourite refreshments and treasured personal belongings. As the days draw on, the festival-goers share prayers and stories about the deceased in an atmosphere not of sadness, but joy, and the belief that laughter and happiness will encourage the souls of the dead to join the party. Though offerings of food are consumed by attendees, they believe that the spirits of the dead have already dined on the spiritual essence of the offerings, so the food no longer has any nutritional value for the living.

The origins of the Day of the Dead can be found in ancient festivals that date back more than 3,000 years, and most notably an Aztec festival that celebrated the goddess Mictēcacihuātl, the Lady of the Dead. Planning for the event is a serious business, and on the three days in question, many people spend the nights at the graves too, making the most of the chance to reconnect with their lost loved ones.

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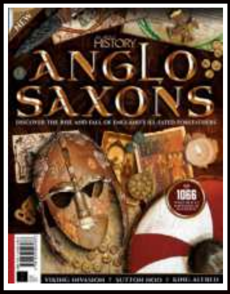
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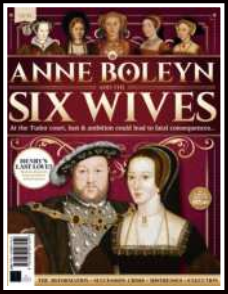
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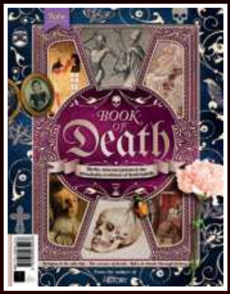
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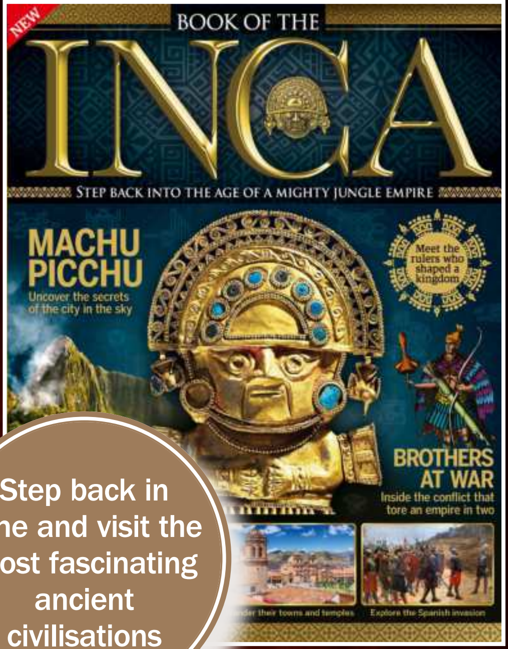
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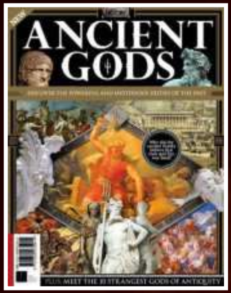
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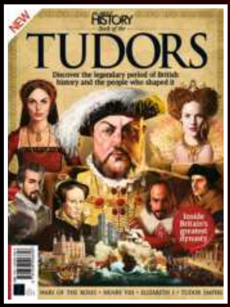

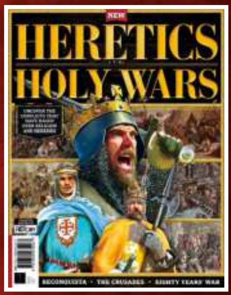
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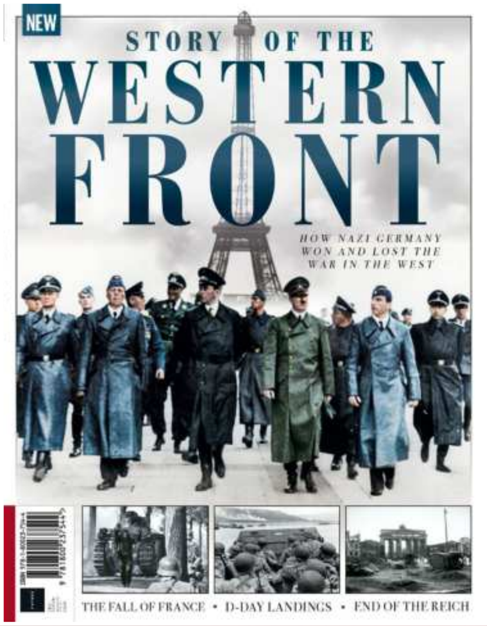

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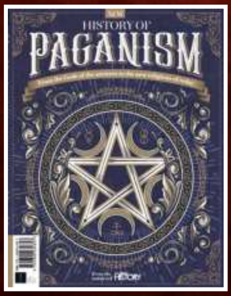

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